US MARINE CORPS FIGHTER SQUADRONS OF WORLD WAR II

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Whirlwind and *Clash of the Carriers*

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Dedicated to honored friends, wings now folded:

Bill Cantrell (VMF-123)
Marion Carl (VMF-221 and VMF-223)
Jeff DeBlanc (VMF-112 and VMF-422)
Jeff Dorroh (VMF-323)
Joe Foss (VMF-121 and VMF-115)
Bob Galer (VMF-224)
Hap Langstaff (VMF-215)
Bruce Porter (VMF-121 and VMF-542)
Jim Swett (VMF-221)
Ken Walsh (VMF-124)

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PROLOGUE

During the World War II, 50 US Marine Corps fighter squadrons designated VMF (for heavier than air Marine fighter) were deployed outside the Continental United States (ConUS). This number included seven nightfighter units. A further 23 squadrons provided operational training, and two deployable units (VMF-514 and VMF-544) were established too late for combat. Thus, the US Marine Corps counted a total of 75 fighter squadrons, of which 67 percent deployed. That figure compares to about 160 US Navy fighting squadrons, 80 of which deployed to combat. Eight (VMF-111, VMF-114, VMF-155, VMF-231, VMF-324, VMF-331, VMF-333 and VMF-513) of the 50 VMFs west of Hawaii did not shoot down a single "bandit", with eight more failing to produce a single ace.

Based on the published work of World War II aviation historian Dr Frank Olynyk, this book recognizes 120 US Marine Corps fighter aces – individuals credited with five or more enemy aircraft destroyed in aerial combat. They contributed 966 (35 percent) of the total 2,627 victories attributed to US Marine Corps fighter squadrons. That is in line with the ratio for other services. However, attrition among "leatherneck" aces was far lower – 16 lost to all causes equaled about 13 percent, versus as high as 24 percent for the other services. Three more US Marine Corps aces died in Korea, where 1Lt John Andre added to his four World War II victories to become an ace.

In the squadron histories section of this volume, location and date of establishment (please note that air stations and ships are commissioned, but aviation units are established) are given, as well as dates of redesignations, when known. Often the changes were unsubstantial, as in assignment to carrier service (CVS), although some observation squadrons (VMOs) became VMFs.

The combat squadrons described here include three overseas scout-bomber (VMSB) units briefly redesignated bombing-fighting (VMBF) units with F4Us in late 1944.

Deployments usually list each combat tour, but because some squadrons operated from many bases in a few months, several entries merely include "Solomons" or "Marshalls." or more details please see the excellent compilation in Robert Sherrod's *History of Marine Corps Aviation in World War II*. Individual and unit combat records are accepted from the published work of Olynyk, and they sometimes differ from the official figures quoted by Sherrod in 1952.

For individuals, a pilot is considered an ace of a specific squadron if he is credited with five or more aerial victories while serving in that unit. Other listings might indicate, for example, Capt. Gyreene (5+2), indicating five victories in VMF-116 and two more in another squadron.

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Wartime commanding officers are usually limited to those who served in that capacity for more than 30 days, excepting some short-term first skippers. There are some exceptions for notable individuals, such as Gregory Boyington's three-week stint with VMF-112. In cases where COs were killed, the name is followed with +.

The US Marine Corps has done a far better job than the US Navy or even the US Air Force in maintaining consistent unit designations, and where appropriate they have been noted. Today, 11 of 13 US Marine Corps strike-fighter squadrons bear the numbers of World War II VMFs, as do all six operational AV-8B Harrier II units. Where applicable, the legacy is noted in each squadron section throughout the text.

While the US Navy and US Marine Corps both "establish" squadrons, the US Navy "disestablishes" and the US Marine Corps "deactivates." Occasionally, US Marine Corps units are "reconstituted" – an unfortunate choice of words, say some veterans, given the allusion to dehydrated potatoes. In some instances I have noted those squadrons reactivated after 1945. Several notable post-World War II units have been noted here under "subsequent records", with the core of World War II squadron numbers still reminding us of a proud heritage.

Squadron nicknames often are problematical. The names cited at the head of each unit history may reflect late- or postwar monikers where none existed previously. And some units changed their names during the war. Some contradictions remain unresolved.

At this writing in July 2013 only four US Marine Corps aces are known living. The senior member of the American Fighter Aces Association is retired Brig Gen Fritz Payne, the first of that elite group to reach 100 years of age in 2011.

Distances usually are rendered in statute miles in this volume, although occasionally knots (15 percent greater) are cited for airspeeds.

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Barrett Tillman
July 2013

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THE FIGHTERS

Between December 1941 and September 1945 US Marine Corps fighting squadrons flew six types of aircraft, five of them in combat. They were a very different batch of machines.

When war erupted in Europe in 1939, US Naval Aviation was caught in a time warp, transitioning from biplanes to monoplanes. The two major combatant aircraft of 1942, the Grumman F4F Wildcat and Douglas SBD Dauntless, did not reach the fleet until 1940-41. US Marine Corps fighting squadrons flew Grumman's rotund, blunt F3F-3 – a good performer for its era with 250mph speed, two-gun armament and hand-cranked landing gear. The squadron commanders and many senior pilots of the crucial 1942 period had learned the fighter trade in F3Fs.

Here are presented the US Marine Corps fighters in order of squadron service.

Brewster F2A Buffalo

The US Navy's first monoplane fighter (following the carrier-based Douglas TBD torpedo airplane and Vought SB2U scout-bomber into service) was the Brewster F2A, christened Buffalo in the name designations of October 1941. The original name proposed by the US Navy's Bureau of Aeronautics was Twister, before the alliterative system was adopted – a Brewster dive-bomber of this period was the unremarkable SB2A, called the Buccaneer.

The Brewster fighter demonstrated how quickly aviation technology evolved. When first flown in December 1937, the XF2A-1 represented a cutting-edge design. Apart from being a monoplane, it had hydraulically operated landing gear versus the manually operated wheels in the Grumman F2F/F3F series. The US Navy had long since committed to radial engines, and the Brewster received Wright's reliable R1820, rated at 950hp. The F2A's maximum rated speed of 240 knots (277mph) was not substantially better than the F3F-3 biplane's 230 knots, but the Brewster offered far greater "stretch" for future development. That promise was met with improved streamlining that worked the rotund fighter up to 265 knots.

The US Navy purchased a typical first production batch of 54 aircraft, designated F2A-1s. Armament was increased from the original single .30in. and .50in. weapons to four of the heavier machine guns. However, only 11 of the Brewsters went to the US Navy as the Roosevelt administration diverted the remainder to Finland, which was resisting Soviet aggression in the 1939-40 Winter War. Those Brewsters arrived too late for combat, but later Model 239s featured prominently in the 1941-44 Continuation War. Pound for

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pound, Finnish fighter pilots were among the finest on earth, with their Brewster "Sky Pearls" establishing a claimed kill-loss ratio of 26-to-1 against the Russians – 496 victories for 19 losses in air combat.

The next production version was the F2A-2, heavier than its predecessor but possessing more power. "Dash Twos" arrived in VMF-221 in the summer of 1941, at least 28 of the 43 delivered serving in VMF-111, VMF-112, VMF-121, VMF-211, VMF-212, VMF-222, VMD-2 and VMO-251. Two were reconfigured as F2A-2P photo-planes.

In January 1941 the Bureau of Aeronautics (BuAer) ordered 108 F2A-3s, differing notably from the previous variant. The "Dash Three" was longer, its fuselage containing more fuel, armor and ammunition. Although range was improved, combat performance degraded as speed, turn rate, climb and ceiling were all affected. Moreover, the design's long, spindly landing gear proved vulnerable to the high impact forces of routine carrier landings. The situation worsened to the point that "Fighting Two", embarked in USS *Lexington* (CV-2), sidelined several of its Buffaloes in late 1941 to keep some available for contingencies.

Meanwhile, Brewster was licensed to export variants of the Buffalo to Britain (170 aircraft), the Netherlands (92) and Belgium (40 planned). Buffaloes saw combat with Australian, New Zealand and Dutch squadrons, but suffered heavily against more numerous, often better performing opponents. Many Naval Aviators enjoyed flying the Brewster, especially the lighter early models. Greg Boyington said it would "roll and turn inside a phone booth" and Marion Carl preferred it as a more agile gunnery platform to the F4F.

Buffaloes equipped VMF-211 at Palmyra Atoll, in the northern Pacific, early in the war but they remained in the backwater of the conflict. On 28 March 1942 eight Brewsters were delivered to VMF-221 on Midway by the seaplane tender USS *Curtiss* (AV-4), followed by seven Wildcats in May. Additional deliveries brought the squadron up to strength before the June battle. Of the 20 Buffaloes airborne on June 4, 1942, 14 were lost with 12 pilots killed and three wounded. Only one surviving Buffalo was able to fly again that day. Capt Phillip R. White's comment has been widely reported since 1942:

> Any commander who orders pilots out for combat in an F2A should consider the pilots as lost before leaving the ground.

However dolorous the Buffalo's record at Midway, VMF-221's overall performance requires examination. The squadron was committed to combat piecemeal, at an altitude disadvantage against generally more experienced aviators flying superior aircraft. In that regard, the battle could only could have gone one way. Given the circumstances, Marion Carl believed he would have done just as well in a Brewster as in his Wildcat.

Midway marked the effective end of the Buffalo's American career. But whatever the F2A's faults, the company's reputation for inefficiency could not have retrieved the situation. Wartime criticism of Brewster included accusations of sabotage, and it is worth noting that while the company built 735 F3A Corsairs under licence, few if any saw any combat due to poor production techniques and inadequate quality control.

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Grumman F4F Wildcat

America could not have prosecuted the Pacific War in the year after Pearl Harbor without the Douglas SBD Dauntless and the Grumman F4F Wildcat. The fabric-covered Vought SB2U Vindicator proved inadequate as a scout-bomber, and the much-maligned Brewster F2A was unsuitable as a carrier aircraft. Fortunately for the US Marine Corps, Naval Aviation and the United States, the Dauntless and Wildcat were up to the task.

Designed as a biplane successor to the F3F series, the follow-on Grumman was converted on the drawing board to a mid-wing monoplane. First flown in September 1937, the prototype's performance was disappointing to the company and the customer. Consequently, Grumman reworked the XF4F-2 into the "Dash Three" model with redesigned wings and empennage. The transition was successful, and production began in early 1940. The British and French took note, ordering the type as well.

The Wildcat was a contradiction, being an important transitional design of extraordinary simplicity. Like previous Grummans, its landing gear was chain-operated with the pilot manually cranking up the wheels. But its uncomplicated design and construction paid dividends in combat, where maintenance was relatively easy.

The US Navy ordered 54 pre-production "Dash Threes" in August 1939, less than a month before the European war broke out. Production began six months later. US Navy fighting squadrons received their first F4F-3s at the end of 1940, gradually phasing out F3Fs while Brewsters remained in those units already equipped with the type.

When BuAer drew up a list of popular names for US Navy aircraft in June 1941, the F4F's original name was postulated as Comet. Because Grumman biplane fighters remained in limited use that year, the F2F was tentatively named the Lightning and the F3F the Planet. Neither moniker was officially adopted.

Contrary to prior practice, the US Marine Corps received modern aircraft alongside the US Navy when the F4F reached frontline units. VMF-111 and VMF-121 drew the service's first F4Fs at Marine Corps Base (MCB) Quantico, Virginia, in October, followed by VMF-211 at Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Ewa, in Hawaii.

A shortage of F4F-3s forced reliance upon -3A variants with single-stage superchargers. Thus, the interim models were slower than the standard "Dash Threes" at altitude. A folding-wing Wildcat, the XF4F-4, was flown in April 1941, adding two more .50in. machine guns in the wings. The extra lethality was requested by the Royal Navy, but the folding wing and additional weapons reduced the Wildcat's punch. Without an offsetting increase in horsepower, the "Dash Four" was about 500lb heavier than its predecessor, and therefore climbed slower. Fleet aviators were not pleased.

Throughout 1942, 21 dedicated photo-reconnaissance Wildcats were produced as unarmed F4F-7s. Besides cameras, the "Dash Sevens" possessed an enormous internal fuel load of 685 gallons – enough for nearly 3,000 statute miles. Although seldom used on operations, the "Dash Sevens" provided a path to fighter transition for reconnaissance pilots, the most notable being Joe Foss.

Grumman built 1,540 Wildcats for the US Navy and US Marine Corps, ending in May 1943 – an average of 44 aircraft per month. It was barely enough to keep up with attrition (worldwide, the US Navy and US Marine Corps wrote off 109 F4Fs in October 1942 alone.)

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After Wake Island, US Marine Corps F4Fs saw limited combat for the next seven months. The exception occurred when VMF-221 committed seven F4F-3s to the defense of Midway.

Then came Guadalcanal. Wildcats flew in the Solomons for a full year – August 1942 to August 1943. Corsairs fully replaced F4Fs in US Marine Corps squadrons as of September 1943, and the Corps' last Wildcats were VMF-441's in the Central Pacific. The last aerial victory credited to an F4F in US Marine Corps service was claimed by Capt William P. Boland Jr of VMF-441 on August 8, 1943 near Funafuti, in the Ellice Islands, 1,000 miles east of Guadalcanal. He was credited with the destruction of a Mitsubishi G3M "Nell" bomber. Subsequently based at Nanomea, the squadron launched on two abortive night intercepts. At the end of November VMF-441 moved to Tafuna, in Samoa, where it exchanged its F4F-4s and FM-1s for F4U-1s.

Grumman ended F4F production in early 1943 to concentrate on the F6F Hellcat. However, Eastern Aircraft Division of General Motors Corporation took up the slack by manufacturing 900 near-identical versions of the F4F-4, designated FM-1s. A mid-war variation, the FM-2, equipped escort-carrier squadrons in both the Pacific and Atlantic Theaters. US Marine Corps squadrons never flew the FM-2. However, "the Wilder Wildcat" scored by far the best kill-loss ratio of any American piston-engined fighter – in the order of 32-to-1 during 1944-45.

Vought F4U Corsair

The F4U Corsair (originally the fighter's proposed name was Mercury) was a world beater – a cutting-edge airframe mated to one of the finest aircraft engines of all time. F4U-1s offered immense advantages over the F4F-4 – speed, climb, range and ceiling, with more ammunition for the same six .50in. guns.

Based on a US Navy proposal in early 1938, Vought Aircraft's chief designer Rex Beisel took carrier fighter design in a new direction. The big, powerful Pratt & Whitney R2800 produced 1,800hp, with the promise of more to come. Despite its size and bulk (it had an empty weight of nearly 9,000lb), the Corsair airframe was extraordinarily sleek. Vought engineers optimized every means of extracting maximum speed, most notably by joining the wings to the fuselage in the inverted gull configuration. Wind tunnel tests had proven the aerodynamic advantage of merging the wing stub at right angles. The cleanness of the design was further enhanced by placing the engine's oil coolers in the wing root.

First flown in May 1940, the new fighter endured a trying development period. In high speed dives the XF4U-1 encountered compressibility, and test pilots noted a variety of design and operating problems. High on the list were limited cockpit visibility and control flutter. Eventually the factory tested a dozen or more aileron configurations, finally producing superbly harmonized controls. In October 1940 the XF4U-1 became the first US single-engined production aircraft to clock 400mph in level flight. The US Army Air Corps' twin-engined Lockheed P-38 Lightning had reached that milestone in early 1939. Whatever its teething problems, the Vought fighter possessed exceptional speed.

However, the wing stub and center section were fairly complex structures requiring more manufacturing expertise than any previous naval fighter. Wartime deliveries began in July

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1942, but unit transition took time. The first two squadrons, VF-12 at Naval Air Station (NAS) San Diego, California, and VF-17 at NAS Norfolk, Virginia, worked hard at turning the demanding Corsair into a viable carrier aircraft. Helped by Vought technical representatives, the squadrons solved the many problems (chiefly landing gear, tailhook and stall-spin characteristics), but BuAer remained skeptical. When the first two carrier squadrons deployed in 1943, they were soon replaced aboard ship by units equipped with Hellcats. Thereafter, the US Marine Corps received more Corsairs than it might have otherwise. The Corps' first F4U squadron was VMF-124 under Maj William Gise. It arrived at Guadalcanal in February 1943, and thereafter the bent-wing "U-bird" became the US Marine Corps' most iconic aircraft.

For its time the Corsair was large for a fighter, and pilots said that the absence of a cockpit floor could be disconcerting. One commented, "You never knew what was lurking down there below those rails to the rudder pedals." Maj Robert Owen G. Owens of VMF-215 wrote:

> The Corsair was a hell of a thing to fly, particularly if you'd started on a much lighter aircraft. It had so much torque that when you poured the coals to 2,800rpm, it would try to walk away from you. You had to have full rudder on there in order to keep control. The F4U had a very large cockpit, so much so that the shorter guys could not hold their rudder all the way in to counteract the torque. Some pilots used to fly with a cushion – one of my pilots, Lt Hap Langstaff, used to have two of them in order to push the rudder pedals further forward.

Most F4U pilots knew how to fight their arch enemy before deploying. In June 1942 a Mitsubishi A6M2 Zero Model 21 crashed in the Aleutians and was recovered, repaired and evaluated. Grumman test pilot Corky Meyer participated in comparative tests of the unexpected prize, and summarized American fighter performance against the Zero Model 21 in 1943. Although Corsairs largely engaged later Model 52s, the tests generally held true:

> The Zero was far inferior to the Corsair in level speeds and diving speeds at all altitudes. It fell short in climbs starting at sea level, and above 20,000ft the Zero could not stay with the Corsair in high-speed climbs. The superiority of the F4U-1 was very evident and would persist even when carrying heavier loads. In combat with the Zero, the Corsair could take full advantage of its speed along with its ability to push over and roll at high speeds if surprised. Due to its much higher wing loading, the F4U-1 had to avoid any attempt to turn with the Zero, except at high speeds, and could expect the latter to out-climb the Corsair at moderate altitudes and low speeds. In this case, the Corsair should be climbed at high speeds and on a heading that would open the distance and prevent the Zero from reaching a favorable position to attack. After reaching 19,000 or 20,000ft, the Corsair had superior performance in climb and could choose its own position for attack.

After its teething problems were solved, the Corsair became an extremely popular mount. Capt Edward Shaw, an ace of VMF-213 said, "There's a plane! It won't do acrobatics like a Jap Zero but it will outfight any Jap plane that ever got in the sky." Boyington described

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the F4U as "a sweet flying baby if ever I saw one," and Marion Carl considered it "head and shoulders above its contemporaries." And upon returning from combat Ken Walsh exclaimed, "Say, if Foss had flown Corsairs he'd have got 50!"

The F4U-2 was the Corsair nightfighter of World War II. An early Air Intercept Model A (AIA) radar was mounted on the starboard wing, requiring removal of the outboard .50in. machine gun. The pilot had a 3in. scope in the cockpit, permitting non-visual tracking at a range of about two miles. A single-seat nightfighter called for extreme competence, as almost every other nightfighter had a two- or three-man crew. Flying from a carrier at night was also extremely challenging. The 'Dash Two" was flight tested in January 1943, with 34 examples produced to equip three squadrons – VF(N)-75 in the Solomons, VF(N)-101 aboard the fast carriers and VMF(N)-532. With limited opportunities in the Central Pacific, the latter unit claimed two of the type's 14 victories between late 1943 and mid 1944.

In comparing the Corsair and Ventura as nightfighters, Lt Col Frank Schwable of VMF(N)-531 declared, "The F4Us would have shot down many more bogeys had they had a radar operator to help them, just as the PV-1s would have shot down many more bogeys if they had had the F4U's performance."

Meanwhile, production spooled up with two subcontractors. Vought delivered 6,560 Corsairs during the war, Goodyear produced nearly 4,000 from early 1943 and Brewster 735 from June 1943 to July 1944. Average monthly deliveries in 1944 amounted to 222 from Vought, 176 from Goodyear and 86 from Brewster in the seven months the company was active that year. Total wartime deliveries were 11,415, plus 182 from September to December 1945.

Because US Marine Corps aviation existed largely to support the infantry, it was inevitable that F4Us would become involved in close air support (CAS). The F4U-1D and FG-1D variants included bomb racks and eventually rocket rails to provide precision ordnance delivery, often within "danger close" distances of friendly forces. So did F4U-4 models, which, postwar, became the standard piston-engined fighter for the US Navy and US Marine Corps.

In the Central Pacific F4Us flew thousands of sorties against bypassed Japanese garrisons. Corsair fighter-bombers carried up to 3,000lb of ordnance – a loadout evaluated by Charles Lindbergh in a 1944 tour of the Pacific theater.

With Marine squadrons land-based until the end of 1944, carrier equipment was unnecessary. Therefore, Goodyear produced FG-1s with non-folding wings and no tailhooks.

Seventy years later the Corsair remains the iconic US Marine Corps aircraft. Well into the 21st century, no other claimant is likely to challenge the fabled "U-bird".

Lockheed PV-1N Ventura

Only one US Marine Corps squadron flew the PV-1 Ventura in combat, but it was a noteworthy unit, being the Corps' first dedicated nightfighter squadron.

The Ventura began life as the US Army Air Force's B-34, intended for export but also used as a USAAF navigation trainer. The US Navy ordered 1,600 as PV-1s that served in

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some 30 squadrons. However, several hundred were diverted to Britain, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

VMF(N)-531 acquired its first Ventura in February 1943, the pioneer nightfighter being operated by a four-man crew – pilot, co-pilot, radar operator and turret gunner. The nose-mounted Air Intercept Mk IV radar weighed about 180lb and, depending on altitude, optimally it could detect bombers at three miles and fighters at two. More often detection range was inside two miles.

With twin Pratt & Whitney R2800s, the Ventura cruised at 144 knots (165mph), being rated at 270 knots (312mph) maximum at 14,000ft. The mid-altitude performance was optimum for the nightfighter mission, as most Ventura interceptions were made between 7,000 and 15,000ft. Armament was six .50in. machine guns in the nose and two in the turret.

Operational tests and combat experience gradually streamlined PV-1 operations. The squadron removed excess equipment such as heaters, deicers and even some armor and bomb-bay doors. The reduced weight resulted in a marginal speed gain, but a noticeably better rate of climb. Consequently, VMF(N)-531 declared that the Ventura had "sufficiently good characteristics to accomplish its mission." Still, whatever improvements resulted from unit-level changes, the basic design was recognized as marginal. The squadron concluded, "This airplane is far too heavy, slow and unmaneuverable to be classed as a *good* nightfighter. It climbs too slowly, has a limited altitude and is a very poor instrument flying airplane."

Nevertheless, following a hasty training period VMF(N)-531 went to the Solomons in September 1943 and began flying missions almost immediately. The US Marine Corps' first radar kill was logged in mid November. Through May 1944, VMF(N)-531 downed a dozen enemy aircraft.

In its formal evaluation of the Ventura, VMF(N)-531 found the design adequate to meet the threat, which largely consisted of floatplanes harassing PT boats. Of the dozen kills, only three were confirmed as twin-engined bombers. Six of the squadron's 12 Venturas were lost during the Pacific tour, none attributable to enemy action. Upon returning to MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina, in September 1944, the squadron had conclusively proven the concept of radar-guided nightfighters. Lockheed's follow-on design was the PV-2 Harpoon, which was never flown by US Marine Corps squadrons.

Grumman F6F Hellcat

It was probably the most demanding task an individual faced in World War II – flying single-seat nightfighters, especially from straight-deck carriers. Mosquitoes, Beaufighters, Black Widows, Bf 110s and Ju 88s, plus a handful of other types, compiled admirable nocturnal records, but they had two engines and one or two crewmen to support the pilot. US Navy and US Marine Corps night stalkers mostly flew solo.

In 1943 naval nightfighters entered combat with a variety of concepts. Land-based operations in the Solomons featured the F4U-2 Corsairs of VF(N)-75 and the PV-1N Venturas of VMF(N)-531, both of which proved largely successful. At sea the expedient "bat teams" of a radar-equipped TBF-1 Avenger guiding two standard F6F-3 Hellcats had

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limited success, marred by the death of nocturnal pioneer Lt Cdr Edward "Butch" O'Hare that November. But help was on the way.

The US Navy's nightfighter program was Project *Affirm*, begun at NAS Quonset Point, Rhode Island, in early 1942. Both the human and material aspects were complex. The pilot training syllabus ran for seven months, while the early airborne radar sets, British designed but American produced, were practically hand-built.

Although the Corsair's performance commended it to nightfighting, its notorious carrier suitability problems remained an obstacle. Consequently, Hellcats were quickly identified as the best prospect. The initial Night Hellcat with APS-4 radar was designated the F6F-3E, and there were only enough to equip two small carrier squadrons. The more numerous -3N variant used the heavier but more capable APS-6 set. Both Night Hellcat versions entered combat aboard fast carriers in early 1944.

Mission-specific modifications to the Night Hellcat included placement of the radar dish in a housing on the starboard wing and shoehorning the scope into the cockpit. Additionally, a flat windscreen was installed on F6F-3 nightfighters before it became standard on the "Dash Five" model, with optimum cockpit lighting. Unlike the F4U-2, the Night Hellcats retained all six .50in. machine guns, although some late-war F6F-5Ns boasted two 20mm cannon and four .50in. weapons.

The -5N completely dominated the naval nightfighter inventory, representing nearly 95 percent of all nocturnal Hellcats produced. The 1,514 "Five Nans" included 80 provided to the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm as Hellcat NF II models.

Meanwhile, the US Marine Corps had established nascent nightfighter squadrons that would fly Hellcats almost exclusively. The first two, VMF(N)-533 and VMF(N)-534, stood up at MCAS Cherry Point in October 1943. By April 1944 three more were established. The first leatherneck Hellcat squadron in combat was VMF(N)-541, supporting the US Army in the Philippines from December 1944 to January 1945. However, by far the greatest nocturnal arena was Okinawa. In the spring and summer of 1945, VMF(N)-533, VMF(N)-542 and VMF(N)-543 provided the greatest portion of the Tactical Air Force's "night cap" effort, downing 93 percent of the Japanese aircraft credited to nocturnal flyers.

Nightfighters from eight Marine squadrons claimed 107 victories, day and night. Hellcats ran away with the title, accounting for 93 kills, or 86 percent of the total. Beyond that, Hellcats accounted for more than 90 percent of credited kills in Naval Aviation nightfighting generally. Although exact numbers are unknown for US Navy units owing to the integration of VF(N) teams into deployed fighter squadrons, Hellcats scored at least 250 victories of the 440 or so credited to all American night flying units in World War II – a whopping 57 percent of the US wartime total.

Shortly after VJ Day the US Marine Corps possessed some 283 Hellcats – a surprising 26 percent of all fighters known to be in operational or training squadrons.

Grumman F7F Tigercat

In late 1943 the commanding officer of VMF(N)-531 issued an objective, unflattering assessment of the Lockheed PV-1N as a nightfighter. Col Frank Schwable concluded that

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the Ventura's replacement should be "a twin-engined airplane with high altitude, high-speed characteristics and with an improved AI [airborne intercept radar]." Without knowing it, he was describing the Grumman Tigercat.

A twin-engined, single-seat carrier fighter was a rare concept in 1941, let alone one with a tricycle landing gear. Grumman received the contract for the F7F that June, but wartime priorities delayed the prototype's first flight until November 1943. However, with two Pratt & Whitney R2800s – the same engine that powered the Hellcat and the Corsair – the Tigercat became known as "a scat cat." Top speed was rated at 460mph, with a 4,500ft per minute rate of climb.

Thirty-four single-seat F7F-1s were produced, but increasing emphasis on the night mission led to installation of a radar operator's cockpit in the 65 -2N models bearing the APS-6 radar set. The F7F-3 reverted to the single-seat configuration, with 189 delivered, followed by 60 -3Ns. The final variant, the -4N (13 built), included carrier equipment such as arresting hook and catapult points. However, plans to operate Tigercats off large *Midway* (CVB-41) class carriers were never fully realized.

The Tigercat was about offense. Its original armament combined four 20mm cannon with four .50in. machine guns, although eventually the Brownings were removed. The ordnance loadout was varied, from two 1,000lb bombs to a one-ton torpedo carried on the centerline. Development encountered the type of problems common to most military aircraft. They included engine cooling, longitudinal stability and a high single-engine speed to maintain minimal control. However, the US Navy's chief test pilot, Capt Frederick "Trap" Trapnell, relished the Tigercat's speed and range. He told Grumman test pilot Corky Meyer how he loved the F7F's high power to weight ratio with attendant acceleration and rate of climb. He considered the cockpit layout the finest in any fighter of the era, and with spectacular speed and climb "Trap" concluded, "It's the best damn fighter I've ever flown."

Deliveries to the US Navy began in April 1944. VMF(N)-531 welcomed the first -2N in mid January 1945. Maj Robert Keller took an advance cadre of 140 personnel with 17 aircraft to San Diego, arriving at Chimu, Okinawa, on 14 August. Here, it assumed the identity of VMF(N)-533. In October the squadron moved to Peking, China, for postwar duty, remaining here until May 1947. Meanwhile, six Stateside squadrons flew F7Fs wholly or in part – VMF-911 through VMF-914 at MCAS Cherry Point, while VMF(N)-531 and VMF(N)-532 worked up at MCAS Eagle Mountain Lake, Texas.

Marion Carl, a Patuxent River test pilot at war's end, said the Tigercat was his favorite piston aircraft for transcontinental flights owing to its range and 190-knot cruise. In fact, he favored the F7F until arrival of the F-4 Phantom II.

Although too late for combat in World War II, Tigercat nightfighters drew blood in the frosty darkness of Korea. The quartet of 20mm cannon proved lethal as VMF(N)-513 shredded two Polikarpov Po-2 biplanes in the summer of 1951, while Corsairs added two more and jet F3D Skynights claimed six kills in 1952-53.

The last F7Fs were retired by the US Navy in 1954, the type having finished its brief military career as a utility aircraft. A handful of surplus Tigercats were subsequently obtained by civilian owners including aerial firefighters and sport fliers. Postwar airshow performer and race pilot Clay Lacy called the F7F "a twin-engined bomber on steroids."

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Summary

US Marine Corps fighter strength experienced dramatic growth in four years of World War II, both qualitatively and in quantity. From the 320mph Brewster Buffalo to the 450mph F4U-4, the arc of aviation progress was remarkable from 1939 to 1945. However, significant US Marine Corps air-to-air operations ended in 1945, never to return. Leatherneck squadrons claimed 13 kills in Korea and one over Vietnam. And the legacy continues. US Marine Corps aviation's prime duty, CAS, remains unchanged 70 years later.

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ARMAMENT

A fighter aircraft is a highly mobile gun platform, and in World War II the standard American fighter weapon was the magnificent M2 .50in. air-cooled machine gun designed by John M. Browning. His products dominated the field of US automatic weapons, including the M1917 water-cooled and M1919 air-cooled infantry guns, as well as the squad support weapon, the Browning Automatic Rifle.

Based on a water-cooled 1918 design, the M2 emerged in World War II form in 1921, primarily intended for infantry or vehicle use. However, during the 1930s both the US Navy and US Army Air Corps (USAAC) began adapting the air-cooled weapon for fighters and bombers. The operating philosophy differed in that the USAAC used mixed fighter armament of .30in. and .50in. calibers (as in the P-39 Airacobra and early P-40 models), whereas the naval fighters employed .50in. weapons exclusively. The first monoplane carrier fighters, the Brewster F2A and Grumman F4F, were fitted with four Brownings. The F4F-3 carried 1,800 rounds of ammunition, reduced to 1,440 in the six-gun F4F-4.

Pilots appreciated the .50in.'s potency. It fired a 700-grain (1.6 ounce) projectile starting at 2,800ft per second. In comparison, the M2 .30in. caliber bullet weighed 150 grains at a similar velocity. Consequently, the .50in.'s greater mass produced far greater penetration and impact energy. A .50in. armor-piercing round could penetrate ¾in. of plate at 500 yards. And at 800 rounds per minute, a one-second burst put 13 or more heavy bullets downrange from each barrel.

Combat experience proved the utility of the four-gun armament in the F4F-4. Against Japanese aircraft, the addition of two more .50in. weapons in the F4F-4 yielded no increase in destroyed claims and reduced the quantity of ammunition available. With 450 rounds per gun (rpg) in the "Dash Three", pilots had about 30 seconds of firing time. With only 240 rpg in the F4F-4, "trigger time" was nearly cut in half. Consequently, many Wildcat pilots switched off two guns (usually the outboard pair), keeping them as "get me home insurance." The issue of ammunition supply was settled in the F6F with 400 rpg. Corsairs, with a thinner wing, carried 400 rpg inboard and 375 outboard.

Properly harmonized, six .50in. weapons could shred a single-engined aircraft. One of the most efficient kills of the war was achieved by a VMF(N)-533 pilot who dispatched a floatplane with just 62 rounds – barely ten rounds per gun in less than a one-second burst.

In late 1944 Vought began delivering 200 F4U-1Cs fitted with four Hispano 20mm cannon carrying 120 rounds each. Few squadrons were fully equipped with them, as records indicate most were scattered throughout various units. Pilot reaction varied

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according to temperament and experience – some welcomed the heavier punch while others preferred the higher volume of fire provided by six .50in. machine guns. Lt Col William A. Millington recalled his experiences with both weapons in the early 1945 period:

> At that time we had the 20mm cannon which was a more effective strafing weapon than the .50 cal. gun, although they were not as reliable. They seemed to get jammed more often, and it was not uncommon to only have one of the four cannon able to fire. They were also prone to freezing at high altitude.

F6F-5N nightfighters came with the option of two 20mm cannon in place of two .50in. guns, but the combination was seldom used. The US Marine Corps' only night stalker ace, Capt Bob Baird, reported the same reliability problems as Millington, and test flew a cannon-armed aircraft five times before he fired a full load of 440 cannon rounds on the sixth test hop. That night he used the cannon/machine gun combination to deadly effect for his sixth kill, describing the result as "unbelievable." However, functioning problems persisted, and only two other US Marine Corps night kills were scored with 20mm weapons.

Bombs

Fighters flew with light bombs from the earliest days of the war, impressively demonstrated by VMF-211 which used 100 pounders to sink a Japanese destroyer off Wake Island in 1942. However, the potential for true fighter-bombers awaited the F4U and F6F, whose larger airframes better lent themselves to ordnance delivery. The Corsair was widely favored for its ultimate variety – a loadout of .50in. guns or 20mm cannon, 500lb, 1,000lb and even 2,000lb bombs and rockets.

Dive-bombing in the Corsair required training and practice, as its sleek airframe accelerated rapidly downhill, but 4th Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW) pilots in the Marshall Islands especially became adept at delivering heavy loads accurately. Charles Lindbergh personally tested F4Us with up to 3,000lb of bombs. US Marine Corps night-flying Hellcats used 500lb and 1,000lb bombs in the Philippines and Okinawa as the aircraft switched from flying defensive to offensive missions.

The mid-war AN-M64 500lb general purpose bomb actually weighed 545lb, including 264lb of TNT. Typical targets for M64s were fortifications, runways and unarmored ships. Both nose and tail fusing were possible. Apart from high explosives, bombs included napalm – a gelatinous mixture of salts of napthetic and palmitic acids. The brew was typically held in drop tanks with an external igniter as a fuse, and could be delivered from extremely low level, defenses permitting. Some of the most dramatic film footage of the Pacific War shows Peleliu-based F4Us dropping napalm on rocky outcrops, defoliating the surface to expose Japanese positions.

Rockets

Eventually F4Us and F6Fs received "zero length" rails that allowed them to launch high-velocity aerial rockets (HVARs). The rockets were produced in 3.25in. and 5in. varieties

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with high explosive warheads or with ogives capable of penetrating concrete and armor. The conventional wisdom held that a fighter launching six 5in. HVARs possessed the punch of a destroyer's broadside. The heavier rocket shot off the rail at about 700ft per second – barely half the speed of the 3.25in. round – and therefore had to be fired at a closer slant range, otherwise the ballistic drop was excessive, and the standard fighter gunsight had no reliable means of compensating for the difference.

Nonetheless, HVARs were used in enormous quantities, often exceeding several thousand per month. Rockets added to the ability to customize fighter loadouts, especially for CAS missions, and set a trend that remained valid for the next five decades.

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US MARINE CORPS FIGHTER AVIATION IN WORLD WAR II

AN OVERVIEW

The US Marine Corps' aviation branch entered World War II with three decades of institutional experience but almost none in conventional warfare. Serving with the Allies' Northern Bombing Group in 1918, leatherneck squadrons had flown British-designed and sometimes American-built de Havilland DH 4 two-seat biplanes. Based in France, the first three US Marine Corps squadrons began combat operations in mid October, being joined by a fourth before the 11 November armistice. A handful of Marine aviators flew Sopwith Camels in British squadrons but none of the classic dogfighters equipped US Marine Corps squadrons. The Corps emerged from the Great War with its reputation much enhanced. Hard fighting and tenacious campaigning at Belleau Wood, Soissons, and beyond popularized the Marines as "devil dogs", based on the German *Teufelhunden* appellation.

However, the postwar doldrums hit hard. By 1920 fewer than 70 US Marine Corps officers remained on aviation duty, and the figure hovered under 50 for the next four years. But opportunities arose during the Central American "banana wars" of 1919 and later, with an air-ground doctrine evolving from practical experience. Institutionally, flying leathernecks existed to support "the ground", and they did so repeatedly. Often still flying DH-4s, US Marine Corps aircrews flew in Haiti, Nicaragua and elsewhere, alternately scouting, bombing and providing supplies, as well as medical evacuation.

Administratively, US Marine Corps aviation was composed of the First Aviation Group at MCB Quantico and the Second at NAS San Diego, with detachments as far a field as Haiti and Guam.

New equipment arrived throughout the 1920s, seldom in adequate numbers. US Army Thomas-Morse MB-3s were provided to the US Marine Corps early in the decade, while captured Fokker D VIIs were absorbed as trainers.

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At length the US Marine Corps received naval fighter aircraft. The Boeing FB-1, based on the US Army's PW-9 "pursuit", arrived at Quantico in 1926, eventually equipping the service's first three fighting squadrons. The next year Curtiss' F6C series was operational in three East Coast squadrons, remaining into 1932. Despite budget restrictions of the Great Depression after 1929, newer and more capable equipment arrived. Boeing's spectacular F4B-4 began replacing the F6Cs, fully equipping fighting squadrons by 1934.

The aviation organization evolved with formalization of the Fleet Marine Force (FMF). In 1935 Aircraft One, FMF, owned four squadrons at Quantico, while Aircraft Two controlled three in San Diego. A US Navy-wide redesignation in 1937 set the tone for units that would fight the next war. For example, VF-9M at Quantico became VMF-1 while VF-4M in California became VMF-2. The latter was the first US Marine Corps squadron to operate Grumman aircraft, as the F3F series set the stage for the wartime series of fighting "cats." The F4Bs were largely gone by the start of 1939.

The Marine Air Reserve program included fighters from 1930 to 1934, but thereafter the ten squadrons were exclusively observation and scouting units.

Tactics

Through the 1930s naval fighter tactics and organization had progressed little since 1918. In 1940 most US Navy and US Marine Corps fighter squadrons still flew three-plane divisions, with a leader and two wingmen, as did the Royal Air Force (RAF). The historic "vee" formation looked good during flypasts but lacked the crucial element of flexibility in three-dimensional combat. Furthermore, it reduced the amount of firepower that could be delivered, as the wingmen necessarily spent as much time watching their leader as they did scanning for the enemy. Only when division integrity was broken did pilots engage in dogfighting, an exercise that went into logbooks as "IBP" or individual battle practice.

Taking note of European events, in late 1939 the US Navy authorized a re-evaluation of fighter tactics. Initial results in Fighting Squadrons Two and Five were promising, and continued when F2Fs and F3Fs were replaced by Brewster F2A and Grumman F4F monoplanes. However, in 1940, Vice Adm William F. Halsey as Commander Aircraft Battle Force recommended against a permanent change. Nonetheless, squadron commanders were convinced of the merit of the two-plane section and continued experimenting. Halsey finally relented, and in the summer of 1941 FitRon (Fighter Squadron) organization was modified into three two-plane sections for each of three divisions, retaining the 18-plane squadron.

Naval air tactics were described in the manual USF-74, *Current Carrier Orders and Doctrine, US Fleet Aircraft,* revised in April 1941. Fighters were expected to provide close escort for dive-bombers and torpedo-planes, with high cover preferred when available. The close escort was stationed 1,500ft above and astern or on the side of the bombers. Fighters were to "sight, report and counterattack enemy planes which threaten the formation escorted."

The most enthusiastic reception for the new tactics came from Fighting Squadron Three, led by Lt Cdr John S. Thach. The USS *Saratoga* (CV-3) fighters began experimenting with two-plane sections and four-plane divisions. However, Thach was unconvinced of the

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merit of a two-plane "weaver" section flying above and behind the rest of the formation. The idea originated with the RAF, which had been on the receiving end of the Luftwaffe's two-plane *Rotte* and four-plane *Schwarm*. The "tail end Charlies" were vulnerable to attack, and often served a useful purpose only when Bf 109s converted them to heat and light.

Thach tested the parameters of the four-plane division, not only offensively but defensively. The value of the new tactic was proven when pilots flying their F4Fs at half power were able to counter attacks by squadronmates flying at full power. The looser formations afforded more room to maneuver, and the resultant "beam defense" evolved into the historic Thach Weave. As Thach explained, "the left section can watch the tail of the right section and vice versa, you can protect each other by continual motion toward and away from each other, firing opposite approaches, shooting the Japs off each other's tails."

Combat experience would demonstrate the value of the two-plane section and four-plane division. When one Wildcat was attacked, it could turn into its partner, "dragging" the assailant across the other Wildcat's sights. The same procedure worked for sections within a division. Because the US Navy and US Marine Corps routinely practiced wide-angle gunnery, the beam defense rendered the technically superior A6M Zero vulnerable to the countermove.

Probably as much by hearsay as by design, US Marine Corps squadrons began adopting VF-3's tactics. Joe Foss referred to "the Thach-Flatley Weave" under the impression that Lt Cdr James Flatley had helped develop the beam defense, but he was in fact an early advocate and practitioner who gave the tactic its name.

Gunnery

Although probably not known at the time, at the beginning of World War II only two air arms trained for full-deflection aerial gunnery – the US Navy and the Finnish Air Force. Both services had arrived at the same decision: a two-plane formation could exploit a high standard of marksmanship to offset and defeat either superior numbers or opponents of greater performance.

The standard US Navy fighter armament of four .50in. Browning machine guns was lethal. A two-second burst delivered more than 100 heavy bullets converging in a cone 1,000ft ahead of the fighter. It was enough to destroy or cripple most single-engined Japanese aircraft.

Naval Aviators practiced a variety of gunnery patterns – low, level and high side, and the patented overhead approach. The latter was especially effective against bombers, and no other air force mastered it so well. Rolling inverted from a 3,000ft perch, the fighter dived vertically, lining up a full-deflection shot from above. Few if any bomber gunners could engage the attacking fighter, which had the largest possible target. It also had the advantage of preventing the fighter from getting "sucked" astern of the bomber in a side approach's pursuit curve. Gen Adolf Galland later stated that if the Luftwaffe had adopted the overhead approach, daylight bombing of Europe would have ended in 1943. However, Germany lacked the fuel, time and resources to instruct sufficient numbers of *Jagdfliegern* in the technique.

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Gunnery training flights involved a drogue or sleeve target towed by a "tug" aircraft. Speeds were necessarily slow but pilots refined their technique, learning proper deflection and sight picture for each pattern. The US Navy's illuminated reflector gunsights helped pilots gauge distance and deflection, best known in the Mk VIII sight with 50- and 100-mil rings. That is, the sight reticle subtended 50 and 100ft at 1,000ft from the target.

The Wildcat's guns were harmonized or "zeroed" to converge at 1,000ft. In the six-gun F4F-4 a "pattern boresight" setting was standardized, with each pair of guns set at 200, 250 and 300 yards. Depending upon unit preference, the cone of fire covered a circle as small as five or six feet in diameter. Some expert pilots preferred as small as a three-mil convergence, since the tremendous concentration of .50in. rounds in that space virtually assured a kill. However, the pattern boresight gave an average pilot a better chance of scoring enough hits to damage a target, if not destroy it outright.

Brink of War

In 1939, the year war erupted in Europe, US Marine Corps aviation possessed 156 aircraft, mainly based at Quantico, with others based in the Virgin Islands, San Diego and Hawaii. Only seven were monoplanes. Two years later, in October 1941, the US Marine Corps fighter component included two squadrons in each group on the East Coast and West Coast/Hawaii, with a combined total of 50 F4F-3 and -3A Wildcats, 13 F2A-2 and -3 Buffaloes and 14 F3F-2 and -3 biplanes. Each of the four fighting squadrons also had one or two SNJ Texan advanced trainers.

In December 1941 US Marine Corps aviation was deployed in two wings, each with a group, and totaling 13 squadrons. The human materiel included 610 officer pilots, 49 enlisted pilots, 41 ground officers and 5,672 ground personnel for a total of 6,372 personnel. The Director of Aviation was an old hand, Col Ralph J. Mitchell, who had assumed the position in March 1939. He possessed a solid background. Although he had missed the Great War, Mitchell learned to fly in 1921 and graduated from the USAAC Tactical School, the Army Command and General Staff School and the Naval War College. He had received a Distinguished Flying Cross for service in Nicaragua. Mitchell would remain in his post until mid 1943.

Pearl Harbor and Wake Island

On the morning of December 7 six Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) aircraft carriers launched some 340 sorties against American naval and air bases on Oahu, Territory of Hawaii. Surprise was complete, with no US Navy or US Marine Corps fighters getting airborne, and too few USAAC pursuit aircraft to matter. A6M2 Zero-sens strafed MCAS Ewa, where VMF-211 lost nine planes destroyed or damaged on the ground.

Half of Maj Paul Putnam's squadron was absent, having ridden USS *Enterprise* (CV-6) to Wake Island in November. The dozen Wildcats were responsible for the aerial defense of the garrison – far too few to accomplish the task. Powerful Japanese maritime air power was based in the Marshalls, nearly 600 nautical miles away. VMF-211 lost seven of eight fighters on the ground on Wake during the first Japanese attack on December 8, 1941

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(across the International Date Line). The four airborne at the time of the attack were caught out of position, leaving them unable to intercept the enemy formation.

The IJN's 24th Air Flotilla at Roi-Namur proved persistent, sending Mitsubishi G3M (later given the Allied reporting name "Nell") bombers to attack Wake on an almost daily basis. The Wake Wildcats shot down a bomber on December 9, with 2Lt David Kliewer and TSgt John Hamilton scoring the US Marine Corps' first victory of the war.

Although lacking proper tools, Putnam's men demonstrated inspired innovation and dedication by cannibalizing wrecked F4Fs to keep a few flying. Vastly outnumbered pilots continued fighting, claiming eight planes in four more encounters. (Japanese records verify seven losses to F4Fs.) However, Putnam's men scored their greatest success on the 11th, during the initial Japanese landing attempt. Four Wildcats led by Capt Henry Elrod employed 100lb bombs to sink the destroyer *Kisaragi*, while another ship was lost to US Marine Corps shore batteries. The Japanese withdrew, marking one of the very few amphibious landings that failed in World War II.

One of Putnam's pilots was 2Lt John Kinney, a former airline mechanic. He oversaw much of the improvised maintenance and described the situation on the 15th:

> Two aircraft ready for patrol. We were running low on oxygen and had no transfer equipment. Capt Freuler devised a system where he hooked eight small bottles to a large welder's oxygen tank and was able to equalize the pressure, giving us about 1,000lb per bottle. This operation was not the safest since a random drop of oil would have caused an explosion.

However, weight of numbers made the difference. The Japanese returned on the 23rd and seized Wake. Elrod died in the ground fighting, retroactively becoming the first of 11 US Marine Corps aviators to be awarded the Medal of Honor for World War II action.

As of March 1942, US Marine Corps fighters were thinly spread. That month VMF-111 went to Samoa, where it remained for nearly two years. VMF-221 and the newly established VMF-222 had 19 Buffaloes between them at Midway, but the "Flying Deuces" soon returned to Ewa. There, VMF-212 and the remnants of VMF-211 made do with "cats and dogs" until re-supplied.

Midway

After the defense of Wake, US Marine Corps aviation's focus shifted more than 1,000 nautical miles east to another small atoll. Midway lay at the end of the Hawaiian chain, positioned to detect if not interdict further enemy moves toward Oahu. From early 1942 Midway's air defense largely consisted of VMF-221's Buffaloes, which droned above the azure lagoon for endless hours. For some pilots the boredom was too much. A young captain, Marion Carl, took to slow-rolling around the perimeter of the lagoon, much to the discomfiture of his wingman.

However, on March 10 Capt James Neefus and Gunner Robert Lee Dickey latched onto a Kawanishi H6K flying boat (later "Mavis") southwest of the base. Dickey was wounded but Neefus made the kill, and presumably Gunner Dickey's recovery was

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enhanced by the congratulatory bottle of bourbon presented to him from Lt Col William Wallace, CO of Marine Air Group (MAG) 22.

In early May the US Marine Corps fliers began to suspect that something was pending. Later that month the SB2U Vindicators of VMSB-241 were reinforced with SBD Dauntlesses, and several F4F-3s augmented VMF-221's Brewsters. The US Navy contributed PBY Catalina patrol airplanes, and eventually the USAAF arrived with B-17 Flying Fortresses and B-26 Marauders. Finally, in early June, the word came down – a massive Japanese task force was en route to capture Midway. The Buffalo and Wildcat pilots sat dawn cockpit alert, ready to scramble the moment the island's radar detected inbound raiders. Just before 0600hrs on 4 June the siren sounded, pilots starting engines in a haze of oil-enriched smoke before taxiing out and taking off. Once aloft, they began clawing for altitude. Some fighters narrowly missed each other on the intersecting runways.

Vice Adm Chuichi Nagumo, who had launched the attack on Pearl Harbor, despatched more than 100 planes to destroy Midway's facilities. The US Marine Corps had 26 fighters up, separated into two groups, and they began intercepting 30 miles out. The combat quickly turned to hash. Arriving piecemeal, generally at an altitude disadvantage, Maj Floyd Parks' command was shot to pieces. In just 15 minutes his squadron was essentially destroyed.

In the limited time available VMF-221 claimed 11 kills, and got at least six. The Wildcats had the best of the situation, with Capt John F. Carey and 2Lt Clayton Canfield downing Aichi D3A (later "Val") dive-bombers, while Marion Carl definitely bagged a Zero and may have damaged two more. Brewster pilots also scored, Capt William Humberd claiming a bomber and a Zero while 2Lt Charles Kunz was credited with two "Vals", although he was wounded in the engagement. 2Lt Roy Corry claimed a Zero and a "Val". Meanwhile, Capts Francis McCarthy and Philip White logged single successes.

Typical of the F2A pilots was 2Lt William Brooks who related:

> My tabs, instruments and cockpit were shot up to quite an extent at this time, and I was intending to come in for a landing. I saw two planes dogfighting over in the east, and decided to go help my friend if at all possible. My plane was working very poorly, and my climb was slow. As I neared the fight, both planes turned on me. It was then that I realized I had been tricked into a sham battle put on by two Japs, and I failed to recognize this because of the sun in my eyes. I turned and made a fast retreat for the island, collecting a goodly number of bullets on the way. After one of these planes had been shaken, I managed to get a good burst into another as we passed head-on when I turned into him.

Brooks survived the encounter, landing at Midway with 72 holes in his airframe. He found the CO and 14 other pilots missing, with only four planes remaining operational, one having aborted.

That morning massacre ended US Marine Corps fighter combat at Midway. The scout-bombers flew successive missions on the 4th and 5th, absorbing serious losses but inflicting no substantial damage to the enemy. Nonetheless, SBDs from USS *Yorktown* (CV-5), *Enterprise* and *Hornet* (CV-8) sank all four Japanese carriers off Midway and a

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battlecruiser besides. At the cost of *Yorktown* and a destroyer, the US Pacific Fleet had dramatically stopped the IJN's Pacific steamroller. Midway gave America the priceless gift of strategic initiative, and US Marine Corps aviation would ride the tip of the offensive spear.

More immediately, the Battle of Midway ended the Buffalo's combat career in American colors. Grumman was producing enough Wildcats to fill the vacancies, and that summer the Hawaii-based fighter squadrons readily adapted to the new, six-gun F4F-4, which would remain the only US Marine Corps combat fighter for more than a year.

"The Cactus Patch"

America's first offensive in World War II was Operation *Watchtower*, the occupation of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands in August 1942. It became the focus of US Marine Corps aviation for the next six months, and initiated the lengthy campaign that carried leatherneck airmen to the siege of Rabaul, on New Britain, well into 1944. Guadalcanal's prime asset was an incomplete Japanese airfield on the grassy northern plain. The Joint Chiefs in Washington, D.C., wanted to prevent Japanese interdiction of seaborne communication to Australia, and thus *Watchtower* was conceived and launched in context of broader strategy. After the stunning victory at Midway, the Americans sought to seize the initiative by keeping Tokyo on the defensive.

The assault troops for *Watchtower* – the 1st Marine Division (Reinforced) – assembled in New Zealand. Since the airfield was not yet finished, three Pacific Fleet carriers were assigned to the operation, providing air support for the infantry until US Marine Corps squadrons moved ashore. Initial landings at Tulagi Island and Guadalcanal itself proceeded on August 7. The Japanese reaction was predictably severe. The IJN possessed powerful land-based air power at Rabaul, 560 nautical miles to the northwest. In one frantic morning of combat on the 7th the Americans lost 16 planes from *Saratoga*, *Enterprise* and *Wasp*, depleting air strength that could not soon be replaced.

Early on August 8 a Japanese cruiser-destroyer force inflicted a major defeat on the US and Royal Australian navies in the Battle of Savo Island. Four Allied cruisers were lost in exchange for minor damage to the enemy.

Deprived of adequate surface and air assets, Vice Adm Richmond Kelly Turner's 16 transport and cargo ships lay vulnerable. The expected two-day offloading period proved excessively optimistic – the US Marine Corps still had much to learn about combat support. Consequently, the carrier commander, Vice Adm Frank Jack Fletcher, obtained permission from the theater commander to withdraw his precious flattops beyond range of Rabaul. The Marines ashore were on their own, creating the enduring legend that the US Navy "abandoned" the leathernecks at Guadalcanal. In fact, most of the problems stemmed from US Marine Corps inefficiency at loading and offloading attack transports. And since no additional carriers would be available in the Pacific for another year, Fletcher's decision to preserve his flightdecks clearly was the only one possible. Meanwhile, Rabaul-based Mitsubishi G4M "Betty" bombers attacked the beachhead unopposed during the next two weeks.

However, help was on the way. Construction crews extended the runway of the captured Japanese airfield, and rudimentary servicing equipment came ashore. Because

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Guadalcanal's codename was "Cactus", the facility was dubbed "the Cactus patch" before it was officially named Henderson Field in honor of Maj Lofton Henderson, leader of VMSB-241 at Midway.

On August 20 the escort carrier USS *Long Island* (CVE-1) launched the initial installment of Guadalcanal's air power – 19 F4F-4s of Capt John L. Smith's VMF-223 and 12 SBD-3s from VMSB-232, led by Lt Col Richard C. Mangrum. The two squadrons became "plankowners" in the historic "Cactus Air Force."

Lying ten sweltering degrees below the Equator, Guadalcanal was subject to torrential rain, oppressive humidity and a variety of tropical diseases. Marines insisted that "Guadal" was the only place in the world where one could stand up to his ankles in mud and still get dust in his eyes. Nights could be surprisingly cold, and the only shelter was tents. Henderson Field was not ready for "prime time." Japanese construction had begun in early July, and by late August the Americans had graded and rolled the runway to a length of 3,700ft. However, much of it was covered with gravel, which tended to batter the aluminum skin of aircraft. Maintenance and servicing was performed in the open, refueling had to be done manually with hand-cranked pumps on 55-gallon drums and ordnance men mostly relied on muscle power to load bombs.

Dick Mangrum spoke for the entire "Cactus Air Force" when he addressed the expeditionary nature of the enterprise. He reflected, "The general concept of Marine Corps operations and training and planning envisions rough field conditions, but just how rough operations can be is sometimes a bit shocking even to Marines!" Henderson was perennially short of everything: aircraft, fuel, ordnance, accommodation – and food. The US Marine Corps scooped up large quantities of Japanese rice, which became a "Cactus" staple. In fact, they ate so much of it that 30 years later at least one aviator still banned it from his kitchen.

Flight operations were managed from a rude Japanese structure north of the runway. Dubbed "The Pagoda" for its vague resemblance to that architectural style, the building had the advantage of decent construction. However, enemy night fliers seemed to orient themselves from the reflection off the roof when they dropped flares, so the pagoda was bulldozed in October. In 1943 an open "control tower" was erected to coordinate takeoffs and landings.

While Mangrum's dozen Dauntlesses provided scouting and a limited strike capability, Smith's F4Fs represented the island's air defense force. However, the "Dash Four" Wildcat lacked the usual performance of an interceptor. With the folding wings and six .50in. machine guns, the extra weight affected its top speed and rate of climb. Consequently, while lacking radar at first, in order to gain enough altitude for a decent shot at inbound "Bettys" the Wildcats needed a good 40 minutes notice to start engines, taxi out, take off, form up and claw for altitude.

Enter the coastwatchers

A prewar organization, the coastwatchers were established by the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) to provide warning of enemy movement in the Solomons and as far afield as New Guinea. Most were Australians, but New Zealanders, civilian volunteers and friendly

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natives all participated. Equipped with heavy, bulky radios, the coastwatchers led a lonely, dangerous life, often forced to move in order to avoid detection. Although officially members of the RAN Volunteer Reserve, their official rank did not always protect them from Japanese casual brutality or murder. But their contribution to the campaign was invaluable.

Wildcats were scrambled when Japanese aircraft were detected inbound. "The Pagoda" boasted a skinny flag pole that hoisted a banner to indicate "condition red," and a hand-cranked siren sent pilots and mechanics scurrying.

During the campaign Zeroes from Rabaul, New Britain, flew to Guadalcanal some 650 statute miles away. Weather permitting, Zeroes escorted "Betty" bombers routinely. In the three weeks beginning August 21, Japanese aircraft attacked the American beachhead ten times, usually committing more than 30 planes per mission.

Commanding "Cactus" air operations was Brig Gen Roy Geiger, double-hatted as CO of the 1st Aircraft Wing. Although 57 years old, he possessed a wealth of experience dating from 1917. Geiger led from the front, logging at least one mission in an SBD and reputedly flying an F4F into action as well.

At first, missions were far shorter for fighter pilots of the "Cactus Air Force." Between August and October 1942, Capt Marion Carl logged 33 combat sorties at Guadalcanal. Excepting one of unknown length (he was shot down and did not enter the duration in his logbook), his median mission time was 1 hour 20 minutes – none were longer than two hours. However, a dozen combat air patrols lasted less than an hour, including a "Betty" downed during a 45-minute scramble on September 28. Mission times notably increased with the arrival of more Wildcat squadrons in October and November. Capt Joe Foss of VMF-121 engaged Japanese aircraft on 30 or more missions with an average duration of two hours. He flew only four one-hour sorties but a dozen of three hours or longer – one stretching to an unheard of 4.5 hours with a drop tank. Marion Carl described the reality of Guadalcanal:

> The pattern began to repeat itself: nocturnal shellings and bombings, followed by daytime air attacks. We maintained standing patrols but couldn't always intercept in time, which is what happened on August 25. An estimated 21 bombers, plus fighters, came over at 23,000ft, but we lacked radar, and the coastwatchers, later so splendidly effective, weren't in position yet. I logged three frustrating hours on that mission without firing a round.

Things went better the next day, when Smith and company claimed six kills from 28 raiders. One fell to Carl, who recalled:

> I was feeling pretty good about the situation as I entered the pattern and lowered my wheels. Suddenly I was jumped by an audacious Zero pilot who apparently had trailed me back to the field. I dived for the nearest antiaircraft position, which opened fire and drove off the Zero. Meanwhile, I was busily cranking up my landing gear and shoving on full throttle. An airfield where you have to shoot down the enemy just so you can land – what more could a fighter pilot ask for?

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> There wasn't much hope of catching the Zero, since he was faster and had a head start, but as we approached the coast I saw his wing come down and, sure enough, he turned back into me. He was eager to fight. Just over the beach we bored at each other head-on, but I wanted to hold my fire until I was sure he was within range. Then he pulled almost straight up into that startling climb that only Zeroes could perform. I had no choice but to try and match him, otherwise he would have a decisive altitude advantage. It had to be a snapshot, as an F4F couldn't climb with a Zero.
>
> At nearly full deflection I got my lead and fired. The Zero blew up, raining pieces down on the beach. I nosed over, checked the area and headed back for Henderson.

The Zero pilot was almost certainly Lt(jg) Junichi Sasai of the Tainan Wing, who had been engaged in combat since December 1941. He was representative of the IJN pilots opposing the "Cactus Air Force", having been credited with 27 victories in more than 70 missions.

Pilots' aircraft assignments varied throughout the campaign. With relatively few F4Fs between them, the first two fighter squadrons ashore – VMF-223 and VMF-224 – undoubtedly allowed pilots to fly "their" Wildcats more than subsequent units. Marion Carl's first aircraft, Bureau Number (BuNo) 02100, got him his first dozen victories at "Cactus". When "Black 13" was lost on September 9 he insisted on painting the same number on his replacement aircraft, BuNo 03508. He claimed his last two Guadalcanal victories in the latter on September 28 and October 3.

Bob Galer landed at Henderson Field with an unusually marked personal aircraft, distinguished by a red cowling and a red stripe beneath the fuselage star.

When VMF-121 arrived in October, more aircraft meant fewer personal mounts. Long after the war Joe Foss was amused by modelers wanting to know the markings on "his" airplane. He flew 34 Wildcats at Guadalcanal and scored in ten of them. Briefly, he had the gunsight removed from his original airplane because the mount interfered with his forward vision, and he possessed the confidence and ability to close to minimum range before shooting. However, the perennial shortage of aircraft required that the sight be reinstalled. The squadron's second-ranking ace, Bill Marontate, used seven Wildcats to score his 13 victories.

Combat became almost a daily occurrence. On August 21 – the day after landing at Henderson – John L. Smith scored his first victory, while 2Lt Eugene A. Trowbridge claimed two. With repeated opportunities, Marion Carl and John L. Smith became America's first major aces of World War II. In fact Carl was the nation's first triple ace since 1918. On August 24, during a carrier bomber raid, he became the first US Marine Corps ace when he added four kills to his initial victory at Midway. The Japanese light carrier *Ryujo* launched six Nakajima B5N "Kates" against Henderson Field, escorted by 15 Zeroes. Smith's Wildcats intercepted offshore, the Marines excitedly claiming 20 victories in exchange for three Wildcats and two pilots. In truth VMF-223 splashed seven enemy aircraft, but it was still an encouraging victory. Throughout the campaign US aerial combat claims typically ran two to four times the actual number of enemy aircraft destroyed, while Japanese claims usually exceeded that.

Late that afternoon *Saratoga's* carrier air group caught up with *Ryujo* and put her on the bottom.

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In a noontime shootout on the 30th VMF-223 notched 14 more victories, three by Carl and four by the skipper. It marked the beginning of a friendly rivalry that continued for the duration of the squadron's deployment.

Conditions ashore only slowly improved. When Bob Galer landed with VMF-224 on August 30 he did not know exactly what to expect. As he later recalled, "I was on Guadalcanal three days before I could wash my hands." Although mild mannered on the ground, Galer was one of those pilots whose personality changed in the air. He was an enthusiastic fighter, posting the top score in his squadron. He was shot down twice, the first time being given up for dead. Upon returning to camp the day after his September 11 dunking, he walked into his own memorial service.

September brought some welcome gifts. Early that month electronic specialists of the 3rd Defense Battalion set up the island's first radar set. It could "paint" aircraft at 150 miles on a good day, taking some of the pressure off the coastwatchers, who could not always spot Japanese formations above the clouds. At the same time the US Navy's industrious Sea Bees got a dedicated fighter field operational a mile east of Henderson. "The Fighter Strip" (later "Fighter One") allowed consolidation of fighter operations and eased much of Henderson's congestion, aggravated by the single runway. The "cow pasture," 4,500ft long and ultimately 300ft wide, permitted multiple takeoffs or landings, which accelerated scrambles.

Meanwhile, the US Marine Corps benefited from the US Navy's misfortune. *Saratoga* had been torpedoed on August 31 and headed out of the theater for lengthy repairs. Her fighter squadron, Lt Cdr Leroy Simpler's VF-5, immediately became eligible to join the "Cactus Air Force". Two-dozen Wildcats arrived on September 11 – a most welcome addition – but attrition continued. Five weeks later only four of Simpler's original aircraft remained.

The mix-and-match nature of the "Cactus Air Force" continued throughout the campaign. Lt Col Harold "Indian Joe" Bauer's VMF-212 had provided several pilots to VMF-223 when Smith's squadron deployed, and Bauer insisted on checking on his men. Known as "The Coach," he was widely reckoned to be the finest fighter pilot in the US Marine Corps, and was well received at Henderson Field. He managed some "guest appearance" missions with Smith's squadron before VMF-212 officially moved up. It was an ironic situation in one way, as Bauer and Carl were old rivals, having first encountered one another while flying F3Fs in VMF-1 three years before. Despite the seniority difference, a competition had developed when both aviators recognized a similar talent in the other. The issue was resolved when Bauer and Carl were reunited in VMF-221 in San Diego, flying Buffaloes, in 1941. They flew inland to a space safely out of view and, in Carl's words, "went at it man to man." Neither pilot gained an advantage, with the mock dogfight ending in a draw. From that moment their rivalry blended into a warm, respectful friendship.

Bauer's best day in VMF-223 occurred on October 3 when, leading a division in Carl's eight-plane flight, "The Coach" claimed four Zeroes confirmed and another probably destroyed. Carl, who downed one plane in the fight, was almost as pleased with his friend's success as Bauer himself.

Watchtower became the ultimate example of joint operations in the year after Pearl Harbor. Land, naval and air forces from all three services relied upon one another as never

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before, much as fliers at Henderson trusted infantrymen to hold the perimeter. The resident Wildcats were joined by USAAF fighters on October 7 when 11 Bell P-400 Airacobras (export P-39s) landed – the initial installment in a growing stream of USAAF aircraft. The sleek Bells lacked the altitude performance to serve as interceptors, but they alleviated the F4Fs of much responsibility for ground attack missions.

The next fighter squadron to arrive was Maj Leonard K. Davis' VMF-121. Launched from the escort carrier USS *Copahee* (CVE-12) on October 9, the fresh squadron added 24 much-needed F4Fs to the "Cactus" roster. "Duke" Davis' executive officer was to become not only the top ace of the campaign, but the US Marine Corps' leading fighter pilot of all time. Joe Foss' enthusiastic, extroverted personality won him friends and admirers for the rest of his life.

Although still crude, living facilities improved over the original expeditionary environment during VMF-121's tenure on Guadalcanal. Pilots slept in six-man tents and ate dehydrated eggs for breakfast under a tarp. One pilot brought a scratchy old gramophone to play worn-out records of popular songs, and outdated magazines were available. Bathing remained basic, usually in the nearby Lunga River. Some pilots grew short beards, as it was more convenient than shaving in cold water. However, they learned to keep the beards trimmed because facial hair could interfere with the proper fit of an oxygen mask. Contrary to the notion of exciting aerial combat, often life on "Cactus" bordered on boring – despite frequent bombing and occasional naval shelling. A born hunter, Foss and a few other hardies sometimes borrowed rifles or sub-machine guns and went stalking Japanese soldiers in the jungle. Joe Bauer put an end to that sport, noting correctly that trained aviators were almost irreplaceable.

As the new order arrived, the old order passed. Smith and Galer's squadrons left Guadalcanal in mid October, though some maintenance personnel remained into November. Upon leaving "Cactus" John L. Smith's 19 victories gave him the title of American ace of aces in World War II at that early stage of the conflict. Marion Carl was close behind with 16.5. "Duke" Davis' exec Joe Foss was quick to pick up the pace. He first scored on October 13, exclaiming, "I felt like standing up and shouting." By month's end he had nearly caught Marion Carl, one of his Pensacola instructors.

On October 16 – the day that VMF-224 officially left the island – Joe Bauer made a spectacular arrival. Japanese dive-bombers attacked shipping off Guadalcanal, concentrating on USS *McFarland* (DD-237), a 22-year-old destroyer serving as a fast transport delivering much-needed aviation fuel. As gasoline was being moved ashore, nine "Vals" got past the combat air patrol and hit the barge loaded with fuel. The resulting explosion inflicted serious damage on *McFarland,* which limped away for extensive repairs. At that moment Bauer was leading VMF-212 into "the Fighter Strip" after the long flight (640 statute miles) from Espiritu Santo. He was nearly out of fuel but, with full guns, he did not hesitate. Again "The Coach" showed his team how the game was played. He dived into the Aichis and, working his way from back to front, he flamed four in succession. Only a crucial fuel shortage prevented him from downing more.

Joe Bauer was the major personality at "Cactus" fighter operations. Not only was he a superb aviator, but his inspired leadership ignited confidence and enthusiasm throughout the command. Bauer refused to cede a moral advantage to the high-performance Zero.

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He told his pilots, "Be an aggressor. You're out here to shoot down enemy planes. Have complete faith in your armor and your confidence in your ability to shoot down the enemy when you get him in your sights." Rather that the dive-and-climb, "boom and zoom" tactics that worked for many US Navy pilots, the combative Bauer insisted, "When you see Zeroes, dogfight 'em!"

Many pilots took "The Coach" at face value. On the 18th his squadron and Davis' rang up 18 victories in a running battle that extended from partway up "The Slot" to Henderson Field. Foss and Marine Gunner Henry Hamilton scored triples. Hamilton was a "Cactus" stalwart, the 33-year-old professional having been attached to Smith's squadron before rejoining VMF-212. He died in combat on October 21 with seven victories to his credit. The Japanese also sustained losses that same day when newly promoted 1Lt Frank Drury of VMF-212 claimed two Zeroes for his third and fourth victories. One was PO1c Toshio Ota, the third ranking ace of the Tainan Air Group. He was killed at 23 – the same age as Drury, but with considerably more combat experience. Since April Ota had claimed 34 American aircraft destroyed in New Guinea and the Solomons, of which at least five are verified by US records.

Joe Foss' best day was October 25, coincident with the Japanese army-navy effort to seize Henderson Field in context of the carrier battle of Santa Cruz. He flew twice that day, claiming two Zeroes in the morning and three that afternoon. Thus he became the US Marine Corps' first ace in a day,

More help was on the way. Maj Paul Fontana took VMF-112 to Guadalcanal on November 2, beginning a nine-month tenure in the Solomons. His pilots observed Armistice Day by claiming three bombers and two Zeroes. Another unit active on the 11th is often overlooked in the history of the "Cactus Air Force" – VMO-251. Although ostensibly an observation squadron, its pilots (led by Maj John Hart) flew F4F-4s as well as the "Dash Seven" photo-reconnaissance variant. On November 11 the squadron's pilots, on detached duty to "Cactus", began shooting down Japanese aircraft, the first two being a Zero and a bomber credited to Maj W. R. Campbell and 1Lt H. A. Peters.

In mid November the USAAF gifted "Cactus" with eight P-38Fs, which were a far cry from the low to medium altitude Bell P-400s (export P-39s) that the "pursuiters" had flown previously. With a top speed of nearly 400mph and a sizzling climb (nine minutes to 30,000ft) the Lightnings immediately became Guadalcanal's primary interceptors. The trouble was they were maintenance intensive, and would remain available in limited numbers until the new year. During the same period "Fighter Two" west of the Lunga River became operational, mainly supporting Airacobras.

November Climax

Beginning November 12 the Japanese launched a four-day effort to reinforce the island. Nineteen torpedo-armed "Bettys" went for US shipping unloading off Kukum Point, and the attack was broken up by 15 Wildcats plus some USAAF fighters. Seventeen of the land attack bombers, plus five Zeroes, fell to fighters (most notably from VMF-112 and VMF-121) and flak. The low-level combat cost three F4Fs but the transports continued disembarking troops. Two future Medal of Honor recipients scored in the fight, Joe Foss

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claiming three kills and 2Lt Jeff DeBlanc two. Theirs was a fitting contribution to the US Marine Corps' heaviest day of aerial combat in the first year of the war.

The battle continued in Ironbottom Sound that night when an outnumbered American task force intercepted Japanese battleships and other vessels, preventing bombardment of Henderson Field. Five US Navy ships were sunk, as were two Japanese destroyers, with an imperial battleship crippled. A misty dawn on the 13th revealed the 36,000-ton *Hiei* immobilized within easy range of Henderson, which launched SBDs and TBFs to finish her off. Eight defending Zeroes were dispersed between 0630 and 0830hrs, elements of three Wildcat squadrons splashing three for the loss of an F4F whose pilot was saved. *Hiei* succumbed to repeated air attacks, the first enemy battleship sunk by US naval forces since 1898. But the Japanese were relentless. Aerial reconnaissance revealed a large reinforcement convoy en route southward. Clearly the "Cactus" climax was approaching.

The Japanese bombarded the American perimeter that night but most shells fell on "the Fighter Strip". Two F4Fs were destroyed and 15 damaged, but by dawn on the 14th "Cactus" retained 14 operational F4Fs and ten USAAF fighters. They were all needed as a strong Zero CAP was maintained over 11 troop transports bearing down "The Slot" toward Guadalcanal's northern coast. The Americans simply could not allow additional Japanese troops ashore.

Joe Bauer, now running "Cactus" Fighter Command, stood the inactivity as long as he could. Perhaps nowhere else in the Pacific did so many gifted fighter leaders work so closely as on that day. Flying alongside Bauer were "Duke" Davis and Joe Foss of VMF-121 plus Lt Cdr James Flatley of *Enterprise's* VF-10. After supervising near-constant missions taking off to defeat the enemy transports, Bauer decided to take a look for himself. That evening he attached himself to a VMF-121 division led by Foss. Pulling off a strafing attack, they were jumped by Zeroes. Foss saw Bauer splash one, then lost sight of him. When the Wildcats regrouped, Foss returned to the combat area and noted Bauer in the water, gesturing toward Guadalcanal. Foss and 2Lt T. W. "Boot" Furlow bent their throttles to race homeward. Light was fading but there was still some time to try to rescue "Colonel Joe."

Joe Foss piled into a Grumman J2F amphibian flown by Maj Joseph Renner, an operations officer at Henderson. Navigating by the fires of burning ships, they searched in vain for any sight of Bauer. But "The Coach" was gone. Eventually Bauer received a posthumous Medal of Honor. His citation said in part, "His intrepid fighting spirit and distinctive ability as a leader and an airman, exemplified in his splendid record of combat achievements, were vital factors in the successful operations in the South Pacific Area."

Seven Japanese transports were sunk or turned back in the dash for Guadalcanal. In the heaviest day of aerial activity to date, "Cactus" had launched 86 US Marine Corps, US Navy and USAAF strike sorties, plus 42 US Marine Corps and US Navy F4Fs. The cost of repelling most of the enemy reinforcement was relatively light – five SBDs and two F4Fs. The four transports that beached themselves on Guadalcanal's north coast the next morning delivered too few troops to affect the balance.

The Japanese intended another shattering naval bombardment on the night of November 14, but the US Navy intervened. In the Pacific War's first battleship engagement, USS *Washington* (BB-56) and USS *South Dakota* (BB-57) defeated IJNS *Kirishima*, sparing the airfields a pasting.

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Although it was not readily evident at the time, the defeat of the transports marked Japan's last major effort to reinforce Guadalcanal. Combat continued into the new year, but the end of the sanguinary campaign at last came into view, two and a half months downstream.

"The Coach" and Others

The six fighter squadrons at Guadalcanal through November 1942 represented a fraction of the potential that the US Marine Corps would field before long. The five FitRons plus VMO-251 fielded about 130 pilots, of whom two dozen were killed. However, the 20 percent fatality rate did not include those evacuated with illnesses or wounds.

When he disappeared over "The Slot", Joe Bauer left an immense void, both professionally and personally. It was a sharp blow to many fliers, as "The Coach" had seemed invincible. Pilots with personalities as different as Marion Carl and Joe Foss shared similar responses to Bauer's death, and his posthumous Medal of Honor could not begin to salve the pain. However, the "Cactus Air Force" was blessed with other top-notch leaders. Their styles were varied, from John L. Smith's tough, no-nonsense approach to Bob Galer's quiet, almost shy demeanor. "Duke" Davis lay somewhere in between. Beside his Annapolis background, he was more reflective as befitted his artistic talent. But whatever their methods, the skippers shared one essential trait – they were effective.

At year-end four of the nation's top five aces were Marines, the other being the "Flying Tigers'" Bob Neale, a US Navy-trained aviator, with 13. The sixth spot was another American Volunteer Group (AVG) golden winger, David "Tex" Hill, with 12.75. Among the 15 known double aces in US service at that time, nine were Marines. The actual numbers were largely unknown then, but in retrospect they demonstrate the exceptional experience level of flying leathernecks.

Leading US Aces as of December 1942

Name	Service	Score
Capt Joseph J. Foss	USMC	23
Maj John L. Smith	USMC	19
Capt Marion E. Carl	USMC	16.5
Maj Robert E. Galer	USMC	13
Sqn Ldr Robert H. Neale	AVG	13
Sqn Ldr David L. Hill	AVG	12.75
2Lt Kenneth Frazier	USMC	11.5
Lt Col Harold J. Bauer*	USMC	11
Flt Ldr George T. Burgard	AVG	10
1Lt Jack E. Conger	USMC	10
Capt Loren D. Everton	USMC	10
Flt Ldr Robert L. Little*	AVG	10

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2Lt William P. Marontate	USMC	10
Flt Ldr Charles H. Older	AVG	10
Col Robert L. Scott	USAAF	10

* Killed in Action

Sixteen Navy pilots had achieved acedom by year-end, led by former enlisted flier Donald Runyon with nine victories flying from *Enterprise* in the Guadalcanal campaign. He would remain the most successful US Navy F4F pilot. The USAAF's leading scorer in the Pacific at that time was probably 1Lt Andrew J. Reynolds, a P-40 pilot with 9.333 victories from combat in Java and the defense of Australia.

An End and a Beginning

Aerial combat declined significantly after the mid November battles. US Marine Corps squadrons claimed 33 additional victories through to year-end, including 13 floatplanes. Action increased dramatically again in January as Japanese air activity was linked to re-supply efforts. US Marine Corps fighter pilots claimed 65 shootdowns in eight days of combat, most notably on the 15th. In a day-long series of skirmishes as far north as Vella Lavella, VMF-121 and VMO-251 accounted for 21 victories.

Unlike their seagoing counterparts, US Marine Corps fighter pilots seldom had an opportunity to escort strike aircraft until early 1943. By far the greatest portion of the Guadalcanal campaign involved air defense rather than offensive missions. The November 1942 climax at "Cactus" did involve US Marine Corps F4Fs running interference for SBDs and TBFs, but almost wholly within easy reach of Henderson Field and the fighter strips.

An escort on 31 January involved one of the most remarkable stories of the campaign. VMF-112 took SBDs and TBFs to Vella Lavella, and the division led by newly promoted 1Lt Jeff DeBlanc responded to a call for help from the egressing bombers. Although the 21-year-old Louisianan met a swarm of Japanese fighters at 14,000ft, he dived away to support the bombers below him. In a low-level dogfight DeBlanc downed three "Rufe" floatplanes, then began thinking about his diminishing fuel supply. Nevertheless, he stayed to tie up some fighters that might have pursued the Dauntlesses and Avengers. DeBlanc identified his opponents as Zeroes but they were Japanese Army Air Force (JAAF) aircraft – the first Nakajima Ki-43 "Oscars" seen in the Solomons. He claimed two more kills, becoming the second US Marine Corps ace in a day, but was then forced to bail out. On Kolombangara Island he was joined by TSgt James Feliton, and both aviators were soon recovered by the coastwatcher organization.

Although awarded the Navy Cross, DeBlanc's action was upgraded to a Medal of Honor after the war. However, he joked that his true value was evident in the sack of rice the coastwatchers received for his retrieval.

After recuperation in Australia VMF-121 returned to "Cactus" on New Year's Day 1943. By then Maj Donald Yost had assumed command, leading the veteran squadron into March. Joe Foss added three more Zeroes to his long string on January 15, cementing his position as the US Marine Corps and American ace of aces at that time with 26 victories. By month-end he was on his way home to receive the Medal of Honor.

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The Guadalcanal campaign ended on February 9. When the last Japanese troops evacuated by sea, the island was entirely in Allied hands.

"Cactus" Summary

In the preceding six months US Marine Corps fighter pilots claimed 510 aerial victories, with by far the greatest share of this total being the 161 credited to them in October 1942. Throughout most of the Guadalcanal campaign, US Marine Corps fighter squadrons consistently over claimed by a factor of three. The detailed analysis in John B. Lundstrom's encyclopedic *The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign* shows that from August through November the leathernecks were credited with 373 aerial victories (386.5 in Olynyk) and likely downed 137 – a 36 percent accuracy rate. In comparison, US Navy F4F squadrons probably got 107 of 193 claims for 55 percent verified.

No explanation for this disparity is evident, as both services operated on the same principle – internal review and assessment of combat results. Neither the US Navy nor US Marine Corps had anything comparable to the USAAF's victory credit boards during most of the war. Consequently, in most units the intelligence officers operated on the honor system. If a pilot claimed a kill it was generally accepted at face value, although a confirming witness might be cited. Most of the error is due to the routine confusion of fast, dynamic combat in three dimensions, coupled with the natural optimism of youthful "type A" personalities.

Fighter Squadron Scores, Guadalcanal Campaign, August 20, 1942 to February 9, 1943

Unit	Score
VMF-121	160.5
VMF-223	134.5 (includes 22.5 by TAD* pilots)
VMF-224	61.5 (includes 6.5 by TAD* pilots)
VMF-112	61.5
VMF-212	57
VMO-251	33
VMF-122	5
Total	513

* Temporary Attached Duty from other units.

Top-Scoring US Marine Corps Fighter Pilots, Guadalcanal Campaign

Name	Unit/s	Guadalcanal Score	Final Score
Capt J. J. Foss	VMF-121	26	26
Maj J. L. Smith	VMF-223	19	19
Capt M. E. Carl	VMF-223	15.5	18.5
Maj R. E. Galer	VMF-224	13	13
1Lt W. P. Marontate*	VMF-121	13	13

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2Lt K. D. Frazier	VMF-223	11.5	12.5
Lt Col H. W. Bauer*	VMF-212	11	11
1Lt J. E. Conger	VMF-223/212	10	10
Capt L. D. Everton	VMF-223/212	10	10
2Lt T. H. Mann	VMF-224/121	9	9

* Killed in Action

With growing strength and increasing multi-service composition, Guadalcanal aviation required more unified command. Therefore, the post of Commander, Aircraft, Solomons, was established in February 1943. US Marine Corps Brig Gen Francis P. Mulcahy oversaw all air operations at the time, with Rear Adm Charles P. Mason assuming the "navalese" title ComAirSols. The experience possessed by Mulcahy and his staff was too valuable to ignore, however, and he became Mason's chief of staff while commanding the 2nd MAW. The timing was fortuitous, as AirSols was about to receive a very welcome addition.

The Corsair Cometh

Victory ashore did not mean an end to combat on Guadalcanal. Far from it. The Japanese retained significant air strength in the Solomons and frequently launched missions against shipping and facilities. Some of those efforts resulted in epic battles.

Within days of Guadalcanal being declared secure, men ashore got a look at the future. It appeared in a unique guise – a crank-winged Vought airframe mated to the potent Pratt & Whitney R2800 engine. The Corsair had arrived. Maj William E. Gise's VMF-124 was the Corps' first F4U squadron, landing at "Fighter One" on February 12, 1943. The newcomers lost no time going operational, flying a PBY escort to Vella Lavella that afternoon. With superior range and performance over the Wildcat, the sleek Vought promised to carry the war ever farther up the island chain.

Two days later the Corsairs received a tough initiation to the Solomons league when Gise's men escorted PB4Y Liberators to Bougainville, the fighters being stacked just above the bombers, with P-38s providing top cover. The Japanese response was eye watering. Attacking from "around the clock," "Zekes" shot down the entire top cover, knocked off two of the low cover P-40s and then engaged the Corsairs. Although the F4U pilots claimed three kills, two Vought fighters went down, one in a collision with a "Zeke". One of the Marines, Lt Harold Stewart, was strafed to death in the water.

As if that was not enough, the Japanese pilots broke through the remaining fighters and hacked down two bombers.

The February 14 mission entered AirSols legend as "The Saint Valentine's Day Massacre." It was a sobering experience. Long afterward then-Lt Ken Walsh related the mood for the next day's mission to Bougainville. "We were all rather apprehensive. There was little conversation among the pilots – all of us sensed what it would be like in the target area." At the last moment the mission was cancelled pending availability of more fighters.

Walsh was destined to become the first Corsair ace, scoring his first victories on May 13. In a large dogfight near the Russells, VMF-124 claimed nine kills, three by the

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Brooklyn-born former enlisted pilot. Back to Bougainville on June 5, the Corsairs continued proving their worth as Walsh notched up his fourth and fifth victories.

That spring and summer more US Marine Corps squadrons transitioned to F4Us. Next up was Maj Wade Britt's VMF-213 in March, followed by the veteran VMF-121 in April. However, even experienced pilots fell afoul of the demanding Vought, as Britt was killed in a flying accident in mid April. He was succeeded by Maj Gregory Weissenberger, who would remain at the helm for four months. Often, converting from Wildcats to Corsairs was accomplished with a minimum of formality. In April VMF-121's pilots were flown to Espiritu Santo, where a quick transition program was initiated. Flying from Turtle Bay, Maj Raymond Vroome's men received expeditious checkouts, returning northward with perhaps 15 hours flight time in their new planes.

In March Allied reconnaissance noted increasing Japanese air strength – an obvious threat to expanded seaborne operations in the southern and central Solomons. The 150 newcomers hailed from the IJN's Third Fleet carrier air groups, reinforcing 185 aircraft of the land-based Eleventh Air Fleet. In addition to concentrating his aerial assets on Rabaul's airfields, Adm Isoroku Yamamoto deployed squadrons of fighters and bombers to Buka, Kahili and Ballale islands adjacent to Bougainville.

As more F4U squadrons began operating in the Solomons, unit maintenance withered. Because pilots usually flew three frontline tours of six weeks each, their squadron aircraft might sit idle during periods of rest and recuperation. But the hard-working mechanics generally remained in the combat zone, often trying to catch up on deferred maintenance. Eventually a system of generic maintenance emerged, with returning squadrons drawing airplanes from the service detachments that maintained aircraft pools. The system had the benefit of greater availability, but it also often meant aircraft of a lesser quality since few groundcrews were dedicated to "their" Corsairs. The situation was described by then-Maj Robert G. Owens of VMF-215:

> The airplanes we flew in combat were sadly not those we brought over from the US. When it came time for us to go down to the Solomons, we got our orders and packed our bags. Just then, another unit arrived at Midway to relieve us – VMF-212. We were sent aboard the ship that had brought them to Midway and they went ashore, swapping airplanes in the process. I was really reluctant about that. Compared to those of other units, we thought our Corsairs were the best maintained. Here we were about to go into combat and we had to give up our F4U-1s and take those of VMF-212 in return.
>
> When we went into Munda it was the first time that there was a group of squadrons flying similar machines. Each airplane had a number on the side, from 1 to 16. Having been assigned to fly a mission in 'Number Five,' I'd get out there on the line and there could be five 'Number Fives' – five squadrons each with a 'Number Five.' So we repainted the aircraft with numbers that weren't like those of other units, most squadrons tending to use the last three digits of the bureau number. Every time it was different, and my logbook shows that I rarely flew the same airplane twice.

The Japanese abandoned the Russell Islands within days of the Guadalcanal reversal, and American troops landed in mid March. Thirty miles northwest of "Cactus", an airfield was

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operational before the end of May. MAG-21 cycled squadrons through Banika, one of the two main islands in the Russell Islands group. As the facility grew so did other features, including "Wimpy's," which was also known as "South Pacific Joe's," a popular divert destination for hamburgers at the end of tedious combat air patrols.

However, Adm Yamamoto kept hammering at Guadalcanal shipping, resulting in some epic encounters. On April 7 the Japanese launched a massive strike against Guadalcanal – 67 "Val" dive-bombers beneath a cloud of 110 "Zekes" (as the Zero was then known to American pilots). They were intercepted by elements of three US Marine Corps and four USAAF squadrons flying F4Fs, F4Us, P-38s, P-39s and P-40s. Of the two Wildcat squadrons intercepting that afternoon, VMF-214 drew first blood. Capt George Britt's pilots claimed six "Zekes" and four "Vals" between Cape Esperance and Koli Point. Two were credited to TSgt Alvin Jensen, one of the last enlisted pilots flying fighters. Commissioned as a lieutenant shortly thereafter, Jensen would finish the war with seven confirmed victories. This engagement would prove to be the "Swashbuckler" squadron's only combat in F4Fs.

Next up was VMF-221 under Capt Robert Burns. While the "Zekes" tied up most interceptors, a running battle drifted eastward from Esperance toward the anchorages. By that time F4Fs and USAAF fighters had cut nearly 30 "Zekes" out of the pack, but the "Vals" remained nearly intact. The Aichis went for shipping off Tulagi, leaving only one Wildcat division to handle the bombers. The division leader was 1Lt James E. "Zeke" Swett, who was experiencing his first combat. As 15 "Vals" rolled into their dives from 15,000ft, Swett tagged onto the hindmost and flamed two. Then, entering the US flak zone, he pressed home his attack and caught another Aichi as it pulled out above the water. However, his F4F, incongruously named *Melvin Massacre*, was struck by an anti-aircraft (AA) shell. He circled briefly over a nearby island, assessing the damage, then rejoined the fight.

Spotting five Aichis retiring northward, Swett shoved his throttle forward in an effort to overtake them. Again working from back to front, he splashed two in passes from low astern. That made five. Then he overtook another string of "Vals" a mile-and-a-half ahead. Conscious of his dwindling ammunition, Swett bored in close and triggered economical bursts – two more went down.

At that point "Zeke" Swett might have disengaged. Instead, he overhauled the last visible Aichi and traded gunfire with the rear gunner. Both scored hits. The "Val" trailed off, dragging a smoky plume, while Swett ditched his battered Wildcat. After nearly drowning he was retrieved by a PT boat, destined to receive the Medal of Honor. Only one other F4F pilot had been credited with seven victories in a single mission – Lt Stanley Vejtasa off *Enterprise* at Santa Cruz the previous October – and merely four other Americans would match or exceed the feat during the rest of the war. Swett attributed his exceptional gunnery efficiency to close-range shooting at shallow deflection. He got close enough to one "Val" to see the face of the enemy gunner – a vision that remained with Swett for the rest of his life.

Swett's squadronmate SSgt Jack Pittman also claimed a "Val", the 12th credited that day. It exactly matched the Japanese recorded losses. However, the enemy only admitted nine of the claimed 27 Zeroes, while seven US Marine Corps and US Navy F4Fs were lost, with all Wildcat pilots being rescued. Most of the "Vals" were unmolested long enough to sink a tanker and two destroyers.

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The April 7 mission marked the last US Marine Corps combat for Wildcats in the Solomons, although US Navy squadrons continued flying F4Fs. Meanwhile, VMF-112 and VMF-221 converted to Corsairs in May, as did VMF-214 in June. At that time, however, the future "Black Sheep" were called the "Swashbucklers" under Maj Henry Ellis. VMF-123 began to transition in July. By August all US Marine Corps fighter squadrons in the Solomons were flying F4Us, gaining experience and confidence in the fast, rugged Vought. Pilots who grew up in the Wildcat were enthralled with the F4U. Capt Bruce Porter of VMF-121 told a hometown newspaper in California:

> The Corsair is one of the fastest planes in the Pacific. It has speed and climb without sacrificing safety, and with a 700-mile range it has changed the picture in giving bomber protection on longer raids. We can run rings around around Zeroes, especially at altitudes over six miles up.

Later that month Corsairs were briefly considered for a mission of strategic assassination. US intelligence grasped a precious opportunity in learning of Yamamoto's inspection trip to Ballale on April 18. However, P-38s had more range so the task was handed to the USAAF. In a brilliantly executed interception, Maj John Mitchell's Lightnings arrived within one minute of the briefed time and downed both "Bettys" carrying Yamamoto and his staff.

Meanwhile, Japan possessed a reserve of aircraft, and continued funneling those from the huge base at Truk, in the Carolines, to Rabaul for operations southward. The Corsair continued proving its worth, but at a cost. VMF-124 lost its skipper when Bill Gise was killed in a dogfight on May 12. His "top gun," Ken Walsh, downed three more Zeroes, but Gise's loss was a blow. Popular and capable, he was sorely missed, succeeded by Capt Cecil Brewer.

That summer the Japanese launched a succession of heavy raids against Allied forces. The 112 sorties on June 7 were met by Corsairs, US Navy Wildcats and Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) P-40s. The defenders claimed 23 kills, eight by Marines. Capt Bob Fraser's VMF-112 experienced two remarkable events that day in combats near the Russells. In racing to the rescue of a Kiwi pilot, 2Lt Sam Logan's VMF-112 Corsair was hit and set afire. He went over the side at 18,000ft and pulled his rip cord. The canopy blossomed but the 22-year-old aviator had not fallen clear of the combat area. His white parachute drew the attention of a bloodthirsty Japanese aviator.

The Zero pilot made successive firing passes at the helpless Marine, who frantically tried to collapse his canopy long enough to fall from danger. The Japanese missed each time, but then, apparently out of ammunition, he resorted to butchery. Intending to use his propeller as a ghastly chopper, the IJN flier sped toward Logan, who recognized the enemy's intent. On the first pass the Marine was able to hoist his knees to his chest, narrowly averting contact. The next time the assassin judged it better – he cut off part of both of Logan's feet. The Japanese pilot undoubtedly would have completed the job had not the New Zealander returned to intervene (one version of the event credits the USAAF's 44th Fighter Squadron as the P-40 unit involved).

Logan continued his descent into the water and was rescued by a J2F Duck piloted by a MAG-21 officer. "Sammy" Logan recovered to return to flight status, and though denied more combat, his friends described him as "a consummate fighter pilot."

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Logan's squadronmate Gilbert Percy also survived a terrifying experience. In the same dogfight as Logan's, Percy scored his sixth victory, but his F4U was hit and he was wounded by explosive cannon shells in an arm and both legs. With his fighter still flying at about 380mph, he got out at 2,000ft but his parachute became a "streamer." Percy saw he would hit the water feet first, and all he could do was keep his feet together to minimize the impact. Incredibly, he survived with sprains to both ankles and a fractured pelvis. Inflating his "Mae West", he swam for some three hours to reach a reef. The next morning he was rescued by Solomon Islanders who cared for him until they flagged down a fishing boat. After 12 months of hospitalization and therapy, finally Gil Percy returned to duty. Subsequently he received a Bronze Star for his helicopter heroism in Korea.

Climbing the Solomons "Ladder"

The next step up the Solomons "ladder" was the New Georgia group, with US Marine Corps and US Army troops ashore at Rendova on June 30, 1943. The main object was Munda's airfield, more than 100 miles northwest of Guadalcanal. The Allied command knew the landings would be contested, and maintained 32 US Marine Corps, US Navy or USAAF fighters overhead for much of the day, controlled by shipboard radar. Four Corsair squadrons were heavily involved. The Japanese response was predictably strong – late that morning more than 30 "Zekes" attacked the beachhead, and Capt Bob Bruce's VMF-121 intercepted. In the ensuing combat over Rendova the squadron claimed 16 kills, Capts Bob Baker and Ken Ford scoring triples. Bruce's pilots also splashed three of four bombers credited in a noontime intercept.

Then the main event arrived.

Rabaul despatched 28 torpedo-packing "Bettys" with heavy escort, targeting amphibious shipping offshore. In nearly an hour-long combat VMF-221 and VMF-122 chased bandits all around the area. Corsairs, US Navy Wildcats and shipboard gunners claimed all the torpedo-bombers, but not before they mortally struck the transport USS *McCawley* (APA-4). When the action ended the Marines reckoned they had splashed 17 bombers and seven fighters. AA gunners accounted for most of the other "Bettys", only two of which escaped.

The day closed solidly in VMF-213's favor. The "Hell Hawks" downed 13 "Zekes" over Rendova and Blanche Channel, with the always lethal 1Lt Gus Thomas accounting for four while his CO, Greg Weissenberger, gunned three in less than a minute. Then another tracked him unseen and riddled his Corsair. The skipper went over the side, striking the tail, but splashed into a safe landing near a destroyer. Finally, at around 1800hrs, three pilots waded into a flock of float biplanes, claiming nine. 1Lt Ed Shaw accounted for three. American pilots were credited with 112 victories during the day, although 101 is usually cited, shortchanging the Marines. US Navy pilots claimed 34, as VF-11 and VF-21 remained active in F4Fs. USAAF P-40s accounted for 11 floatplanes. AirSols wrote off 14 airplanes and seven pilots while Radio Tokyo confidently stated that the Americans had lost 32. In the three actions US Marine Corps squadrons claimed 65 shootdowns – a single day record that remained unbeaten until the Okinawa campaign in April 1945.

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Combat remained steady thereafter, with Marines engaging on eight days in July. Corsairs claimed 31 victories on the 15th (the Japanese lost 10 or 11) and 40 more around Kahili two days later (known IJN losses were 12). The mission of the 15th was especially telling, as between them VMF-122 and VMF-213 claimed 15 "Bettys" – a detachment from the 751st Kokutai lost six of nine, largely ending the G4M's appearance in daylight over the Solomons.

The Americans occupied Vella Lavella in August, when IJN aircraft losses approached 250 – the highest monthly toll since October 1942, with the sanguinary carrier Battle of Santa Cruz. A 4,000ft airfield was fully operational before the end of September 1943. Marine pilots claimed 109 victories in August, distributed among five squadrons. The leaders were VMF-124 and Bob Baker's VMF-123 with 35 and 32 kills, respectively. Ken Walsh of VMF-124 ended his long string, becoming only the second Marine to achieve 20 victories. The original VMF-214, the "Swashbucklers", contributed 22.

Walsh's last combats were memorable. On August 15, covering the Vella Lavella landings, he capped the beachhead with his division, which was bounced by five "Zekes." Nevertheless, he turned the tables and chased a Mitsubishi to destruction north of the island. Then, recalled by the shipboard fighter director, Walsh latched onto a string of "Vals," and experience showed how that arrangement usually went. He downed two before more "Zekes" intervened. Walsh shoved everything forward with his left hand and outpaced his assailants in his thoroughly perforated Corsair. He managed a safe landing at newly won Munda, with no hydraulics and one tire deflated. The flightline crews cheered his performance, then counted 57 holes in the F4U, which never flew again.

Walsh landed at Munda again on the 30th, as his assigned fighter had engine trouble. He borrowed a "loaner" from the senior officer, Maj Jim Neefus, who had scored the Marines' first Buffalo victory at Midway in March 1942. Throttling northward, Walsh caught up with VMF-124 near Kahili in time to tangle with a cloud of 55 "Zekes". The Japanese fighters attacked B-24 Liberators that the US Marine Corps unit had been escorting from astern, giving Walsh an opening. In short, controlled bursts he destroyed two, then headed south for the rendezvous point for the return leg home. The enemy was persistent, however, Walsh seeing a B-24 shot down with no parachutes and then a P-39 pilot forced to bail out. The Marine ace was then overwhelmed himself, but not before he had claimed two more kills. Ditching off Vella Lavella, Walsh was brought ashore by Sea Bees. He eventually returned to Guadalcanal on an LST with the USAAF pilot he had seen parachuting from the P-39.

The Kahili mission had produced good bombing results, but at a cost – nine US aircraft lost versus claims of 14 downed. Known Japanese losses from three air groups were five destroyed and four damaged.

For his single-handed fights against the odds, Ken Walsh would receive the Medal of Honor. With 20 victories to his name, he ranked second behind Joe Foss.

VMF-124 completed its tour in September – the first for a Corsair unit. In seven months the squadron had notched 69 victories and produced three aces, Walsh, Capt William E. Crowe and 1Lt Howard "Mick" Finn. Maj Bill Millington took the squadron home, and he would remain at the helm until early 1945.

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After nearly a year-and-a-half of experience, Japanese fighter pilots began to appreciate the American four-plane division. It afforded greater flexibility and mutual protection than the previous three-plane flight, which inevitably left one plane unsupported. In April 1943 the IJN's 204th Fighter Group started shifting from three-plane flights to two pairs, but other units took far longer to switch. Later that same year Bruce Porter of VMF-121 observed:

> They have begun to adopt our tactic of flying in groups because their casualties were so high, and the present pilots are less experienced. They used to dote on acrobatics and barrel rolls but found that such flying made easier shooting for our boys.

On August 28 VMF-214, then under Capt John Burnett, logged an exceptional mission. 1Lt Alvin Jensen, a former enlisted pilot, was separated from his division during a sweep to Kahili. Caught in violent weather, his F4U was forcibly ejected from the clouds, emerging inverted directly over the target. As he accidentally caught the defenders by surprise, he rolled upright and exploited the situation. Pressing his dive almost to ground level, he sped the length of the runway, clamping down on the trigger as row upon row of targets presented themselves. The carnage was incredible. Upon returning to the Russells Jensen thought he might have burned as many as two-dozen aircraft. Subsequent photo-reconnaissance showed 24 hulks along the flightline. Jensen received a Navy Cross.

Much later a bittersweet corollary emerged. Missing that day was another VMF-214 pilot, 1Lt Charles Lanphier. He was downed in the storm front and captured – he perished in captivity in May 1945. His brother Thomas speculated that some of the Kahili damage had been done by Charlie. In any case, the family contributed to the Allied cause as Capt Thomas Lanphier had flown the Yamamoto interception in April.

A unique name entered the AirSols logbook on August 30 when VMF-215 claimed a "Fred" over Santa Isabel Island. Allied air intelligence caught a whiff of the lone Focke-Wulf Fw 190 supplied to Japan for evaluation and assumed that the Luftwaffe fighter was being used by the JAAF.

"So You Are Going to the South Pacific"

In August 1943, a year after the Guadalcanal campaign began, the US Navy issued a publication for aviation personnel headed for the Pacific. The 26-page pamphlet addressed a variety of subjects ranging from athlete's foot to water purification. The variety of threats beyond the Japanese armed forces included dysentery, fungus, insects, ringworm and tropical ulcers. The prominent insects were centipedes and scorpions. Apart from topical aspects such as climate, clothing and natives, the treatise honestly dealt with the lack of entertainment. Squadron personnel officers were advised to procure enough books for a library, with representative subject matter, and equipment for games ranging from acey-deucy to volleyball.

The Solomons climate was, in a word, miserable. In the 1900s author Jack London said that if he were a king, the worst punishment he could inflict would be banishment to the Solomon Islands. Oppressive heat, bake oven humidity and drenching rains were routine. Flying weather could be treacherous with huge cloud build-ups topping 30,000ft, generating churning winds and potentially fatal turbulence.

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In 2002 a panel of VMF-214 pilots addressed the "Black Sheep" reality versus legend. Asked about the atrocious 1970s television series, retired Brig Gen Bruce Matheson declared, "If we'd had Quonset huts instead of flooded tents, all that chow, plenty of booze and hot and cold running nurses, hell, I'd still be there!"

First in the Dark

In September 1943 a new player arrived in the Solomons – an aircraft and a mission as different from the Corsair as day and night.

The US Marine Corps' first nightfighter squadron was Lt Col Frank Schwable's VMF(N)-531, flying modified PV-1 Venturas from the Russells. The -1N version boasted air-intercept radar and additional armament. Although slow by F4U standards, the Ventura had enough performance to cope with the most common nocturnal threat – not Japanese bombers but aggressive floatplanes that often harassed US Navy PT boats. The "Gray Ghosts" benefited from indigenous radar controllers, producing optimum familiarity and effectiveness.

Capt Duane Jenkins' crew scored the first kill, over Torokina Point, Bougainville, on November 13, and the unit added two more by year-end. The squadron notched an additional nine victories through May, with Schwable and Lt Col John Harshberger tied at four each.

Schwable took the "Ghosts" home in August, having lost six planes but none in combat. Twelve kills in as many months was not a large score, but it was sufficient to prove the concept and continue improving the breed.

Enter the "Black Sheep"

VMF-214 completed its tour in the Russells and then moved to Munda. Although rough and disease-ridden, Munda supported increasing activity as the range narrowed toward Rabaul. Formerly the "Swashbucklers", and newly dubbed the "Black Sheep", VMF-214 began another forward tour under Maj Gregory Boyington, who had previously led VMF-122 and VMF-112.

On its first major mission, on September 16, 1943, Boyington's reorganized VMF-214 contributed 24 Corsairs to a sweep of some 100 Allied fighters. They clashed with 30 or more "Zekes", the first of which jumped Boyington's division. "Pappy" eluded the ambush, shoved up the power, armed his guns and began choosing targets. The fight degenerated into a brawl of largely solo combats. Upon landing the squadron claimed 11 kills, five by Boyington, although most were unwitnessed. A functional alcoholic, he celebrated in predictable style:

> Not even the possibility of a hairy hangover bothered me in the slightest. So I took aboard a load of issue brandy which our flight surgeon had been so kind to supply.

It was the beginning of the "Black Sheep" legend.

Meanwhile, some old-line squadrons were rolling out. VMF-121 completed a year in the Solomons in October and headed Stateside with 15 aces and 208 victories to its credit – both records in the US Marine Corps.

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Rabaul

The naval-air complex around Rabaul, New Britain, contained the greatest concentration of Japanese forces in the Southwest Pacific. The Allied command seriously considered capturing Rabaul, which had been seized from a light Australian garrison early in the war. However, with nearly 100,000 army and navy personnel, the fortress seemed to invite aerial strangulation.

The US Fifth Air Force, aided by the RNZAF, began pounding Rabaul in October. The immediate goal was to weaken any Japanese response to the Bougainville landings, but neutralizing Rabaul would benefit Allied operations throughout the theater. When the campaign began, Japanese air strength at Rabaul and environs was pegged at about 230 airplanes on five airfields, each with all-weather runways. The US Navy launched two carrier strikes against Rabaul in November, achieving moderate success. Four heavy cruisers were seriously damaged, two others less so. American aerial combat claims were extravagant, topping 160 combined for both operations, while Japanese sources indicate about 50 losses in total. But the message was clear – Rabaul would remain a priority target.

US Marine Corps squadrons, meanwhile, continued climbing the Solomons "ladder" that fall and winter, including Vella Lavella in mid October. The first Corsairs ashore at western Bougainville's Torokina strip were VMF-216's, landing on December 10 – a week after the field was completed. Douglas R4D transports flew in supplies and maintenance personnel ready to receive Maj Rivers Morrell's F4Us.

In a harbinger of things to come, on December 17 a joint operation was flown from the strip involving 31 US Marine Corps Corsairs, 22 Hellcats and 24 RNZAF P-40s escorting USAAF B-24s. Neither the premiere nor the encore mission accomplished much, and the New Zealanders lost their CO, the well regarded Wg Cdr Trevor O. Freeman. Not even Boyington's radio chiding to come up and fight elicited much response from the enemy, other than a flippant American-accented, "Come on down, sucker!"

Boyington had led several missions northward through October before a rest period at Espiritu Santo, with his Solomons tally pegged at 14. Back in action from Vella Lavella in late November, the squadron experienced some hard-fought combats, losing three pilots each on December 23 (including the exec, Maj Pierre Carnagy) and the 28th. "Pappy" continued leading sweeps and escorts in December, steadily claiming victories.

AirSols had changed tactics on December 23. Reasoning that the Japanese were more likely to respond to unescorted bombers, it was decided to send the Liberators in first with the escort in trail. It worked. Among 98 Zero sorties flown on this date, some 40 tangled with Allied fighters and 19 were claimed to have been downed by Marine pilots from three squadrons. Boyington's "Black Sheep" were best positioned that afternoon, accounting for a dozen victories – Hellcat pilots added three more. Known Japanese losses numbered just six.

The Americans grew to like and respect their RNZAF allies. Capable and aggressive, the Kiwis had a sense of humor too. A widely circulated AirSols story described a Marine limping back to base in a shot-up F4U, radioing a continuing lament of his various problems. Finally, a Kiwi P-40 pilot interrupted, "Shut up, Yank, and die like a man!" Several RNZAF units rotated through the Solomons, but the two more successful were Nos. 14 and 15 Sqns, both with more than 20 victories.

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The joint Rabaul missions produced some tremendous combats – churning "furballs" in the language of a later generation – with Corsairs, Hellcats, Warhawks and Zeroes slugging away at each other, each seeking a momentary advantage. Through December Rabaul typically lofted 70 to 100 fighters, AirSols contesting with similar numbers.

Among those returning for a second combat tour was Marion Carl, now a major commanding VMF-223. Between weather delays and cancellations, many missions failed to reach their targets, but AirSols was not to be put off. Carl said, "As a squadron commander I had a turn at leading the Rabaul missions, which aggressive aviators regarded as gravy trains." He noted that with six presumed victories in China, Boyington was closing in on Joe Foss' record of 26, and the field was narrowed for the "top gun" title. At the time Carl had 16.5 victories, while John L. Smith (19) and Ken Walsh (20) were out of combat. Carl continued:

> So, when I re-entered the South Pacific 'ace race' it was a close contest. I was certainly competitive as a fighter ace, but since I was only recently back in combat I could afford to take it easy at first. On December 23 I led my guys up to Torokina, where we topped off and launched for Rabaul – I led 20 Corsairs and 28 P-38s. We made contact over Cape St. George and I stalked a new opponent through the clouds. It was a Kawasaki [Ki-61] 'Tony', a sleek, good-looking Army fighter that resembled the Messerschmitt 109. I splashed him between Rabaul and New Ireland, while the rest of the squadron claimed three more.

Command and control was always a problem, even when radio communication worked well. Carl explained:

> One thing quickly became evident on those missions. Although I always led -223 and sometimes the entire fighter sweep, nobody could control so many aircraft simultaneously. It was a flight leader's war, with four-plane divisions usually fighting their own battle in their particular slice of sky. I led another sweep on the 30th but got no further than Torokina owing to bad weather. The same thing happened the next day.

At Vella Lavella on the afternoon of December 29 Greg Boyington looked up Marion Carl, slated to lead the next day's Rabaul sweep. Although Boyington's memoir said that Carl ("gentleman that he was") offered to give up the assignment, Carl described the opposite – Boyington asked for the favor. As Carl said, "I thought I was giving up little because -223 still had had lots of time left in combat." Both Boyington and Carl erred in reporting that the conversation had taken place on January 2, 1944. The operations order clearly shows it was December 29, 1943. In any case, Carl's generosity produced no benefit for Boyington. Corsairs and Hellcats claimed just five victories, while the Japanese lost one "Zeke" out of 82 that took off.

By year-end Rabaul's air strength was down to approximately 130 aircraft, even fewer being operational. However, Allied air power was nowhere close to destroying the bastion's capability. From the first dedicated fighter sweep on December 17 through month's end, IJN records show 25 Zero losses among 492 sorties, whereas US Marine Corps squadrons

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alone claimed 79 victories. US Navy pilots added nine more, so excluding USAAF and RNZAF claims, the naval squadrons reckoned 3.5 victories for every actual Japanese loss. The aerial combat figures, of course, do not include aircraft destroyed on the ground.

Leading US Aces as of December 1943

Name	Service	Score
Maj Joseph J. Foss	USMC	26
Maj Gregory Boyington	USMC	21 (2 AVG)
Capt Richard I. Bong	USAAF	21
1Lt Kenneth A. Walsh	USMC	20
Lt Col John L. Smith	USMC	19
Maj Marion E. Carl	USMC	16.5
Maj Thomas J. Lynch	USAAF	16
Capt George S. Welch	USAAF	16
Maj Edward Cragg	USAAF	15
Lt Col David L. Hill	USAAF	14.25

Rabaul Reduced

Greg Boyington was getting twitchy. His inflated claims with the "Flying Tigers", combined with his optimistic record in the Solomons, put him within range of Joe Foss' 26 victories for the Marine Corps record. "Pappy" even confided to a reporter that he might run his string to 30 or more. On January 2 his accepted score stood at 25, but time was running out. The "Black Sheep" were due to complete their tour in a few days. On the morning of January 3 Boyington again headed for Rabaul with three "Black Sheep" divisions behind Maj Rivers Morrell, leading 35 other Marines. But as always it was a flight commander's war. Boyington rolled in on some "Zekes", flamed one, and then disappeared. So did his wingman, Capt George Ashmun.

Upon returning to base the Americans again indulged in serious overclaiming. Ten US Marine Corps and US Navy pilots were credited with nine kills, whereas the two remaining Japanese fighter groups, the 204th and 253rd, lost just two men.

Unknown to the Americans, Boyington was alive. Ashmun had been killed when the pair was trapped in a low-level melee without support, but Boyington either bailed out or ditched – accounts vary. He was picked up by the Japanese and, recognized as a valuable prisoner, was sent to Japan. There, the enemy learned that Boyington had been awarded a "posthumous" Medal of Honor.

By the time VMF-214 rotated home seven other "Black Sheep" had become aces, paced by 1Lt Chris Magee with nine. Magee was a cousin of John Gillespie Magee, the Royal Canadian Air Force pilot who wrote the lyric poem *High Flight*. Conversely, Boyington's squadron had lost 25 aircraft and more than a dozen aviators.

If the Americans were often excessive in their victory claims, the Japanese dealt in fantasy. Frequently, Rabaul's fighter pilots claimed 50 victories in a day, the record being

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January 28, 1943 when they claimed 79 kills, plus probables. American records indicate five airplanes were missing and one fatally damaged on that date. The remarkable thing is that the Japanese believed their own figures, despite the fact that as no successful Solomons air campaign could have sustained such grievous losses.

"Butcher Bob"

Meanwhile, Maj Robert Owens' VMF-215 was more competitive than most US Marine Corps fighter squadrons – perhaps more than any. Owens himself made ace but his three "top guns" dominated the statistics, as Bob Hanson, Don Aldrich and Hal Spears scored from 15 to 20 victories with the "Fighting Corsairs". Hanson had joined the squadron with five victories to his name from the pre-Boyington VMF-214. A capable, ambitious 23-year-old, he had seen much of the world, having grown up in India and then toured Europe. He was determined to gain the top spot on the roster of US Marine Corps fighter pilots.

On January 14, 1944 Owens' men took off from Vella Lavella and landed to refuel at Torokina, where they were briefed on a bomber escort mission. Although one plane crashed on takeoff, the remaining 21 rendezvoused with the Avengers. The timing was excellent – the Corsairs counted 60 "Zekes" over the New Ireland coast. The aggressive Japanese went for the bombers, trying to deter them from their objective. Remaining with the attacking TBFs, Hanson and 2Lt Richard V. Bowman recovered low over Simpson Harbor. Unaccountably, several "Zekes" were orbiting nearby, flying at perhaps 180 knots. "Butcher Bob" Hanson saw meat on the table, and he helped himself.

Tailing in behind some Mitsubishis, Hanson burned his first target immediately. Bowman followed his own prey into a cloud, emerging to find his victim engulfed in flames. At that point the two Corsairs became separated. Hanson also pursued a "Zeke" through clouds, and reported exploding it. Orbiting the cloud deck, he noted two more "Zekes" stalking a section of Corsairs and turned into them, forcing them off. Climbing to 3,000ft, Hanson got another opportunity when two "Zekes" passed 500ft beneath him. The Japanese pilots saw him coming and headed for the clouds, but they presented the ace with a quartering shot. One burst was enough to flame the nearest.

As he recovered from his dive, Hanson zoom-climbed for precious height. He reported:

> At 2,500ft I looked out of the clouds again and saw I was right on the tail of a Zero and just a little below him. I ran right up on him and fired. My tracers went into his belly and he burst immediately into flames. I think this is the best way to shoot them – from astern and below.

Hanson sparred with a few other "Zekes", then banked for the rendezvous position. En route he got another chance, diving on an unsuspecting enemy fighter and flaming him from behind. That made five. Low on ammunition, he saw two bandits astern of him so "I ducked into the clouds and beat it for home." Hanson recovered at Torokina with only 20 gallons of fuel remaining, being the last one back. He found an excited debrief underway. The squadron claimed another 14 confirmed and six probables, losing three planes and two pilots.

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On his next five missions Hanson set a blazing pace, claiming 15 more kills, all but one in multiples. His rival Don Aldrich was credited with nine victories in the same 11 days to month's end. Hanson's string ended with his life. On February 3, the day before his 24th birthday, he was returning scoreless from a Rabaul mission. Apparently seeking to vent his frustration, he dropped down to strafe a lighthouse and either fell to AA fire or misjudged his wave-top pullout. Officially he was tied with Boyington at 25 victories, and two of the Corps' three "top guns" were gone.

However impressive individual scores appeared, they did not match enemy records. Available Japanese figures for January 1944 look like 73 Zero losses versus 302 US Marine Corps claims (59 on the 23rd alone) and 91 by the US Navy. Undoubtedly IJN records miss some A6M losses because several days only cite pilot losses, but still the Americans were overclaiming at a rate of more than five-to-one.

Amid the attention accorded high scoring aces, it is easy to overlook a more important fact. Japanese air power at Rabaul was steadily being ground down by relentless Allied missions, which were far more obstructed by weather than the Emperor's remaining "sea eagles." Allied air power moved ever closer to Rabaul following the construction of two parallel runways near Piva, inland from Cape Torokina on Bougainville's west coast. Beginning in November 1943, Sea Bees bladed, rolled and packed Uncle strip, eventually extending it to 10,000ft for heavy bombers. The southern runway, Piva Yoke, mainly supported fighters.

Rabaul was further imperiled when New Zealanders landed on Green Island in mid February 1944. The enemy response was surprisingly small, considering the danger of an Allied air base just 120 miles east of Rabaul. Early on the 15th a squadron of "Vals" attacked Allied shipping off Green Island. They were intercepted by VMF-212, flying from the Piva strip. Maj Hugh Elwood's pilots splashed seven raiders, with three being credited to 1Lt Phil DeLong. By mid February the 24-year-old Michigander was well experienced – he had destroyed or damaged 13 planes in five weeks, and entering his eighth combat he handled unescorted "Vals" much as Jim Swett had done. DeLong recounted:

> We got there just as day was breaking. I saw the 'Vals' – there were 15 of them. I saw them starting quite high and rolling in. I couldn't see any sense in letting them get down to the ships, so I pulled in behind them. I got a good view of the gunner and shot him up. Then the airplane blew up. I got another two of them. My wingman had an armament fuse missing. Unable to use his guns, all he did was go along for the ride!

Other than occasional night raiders, no further air attacks bothered the Green Island task force.

Although closer to Rabaul than other islands, life on Bougainville had its drawbacks. On March 8 Piva Yoke airstrip came under Japanese artillery fire. Maj Keller, barely a month in command of VMF-223, was hospitalized with fragments in one hip, while a private first class was killed. Additionally, an F4U, two vehicles and the squadron's ready room were destroyed.

Sea Bees were the world standard at rapid air base construction, completing a 5,000ft fighter strip on Green Island by the middle of March. The first two F4U squadrons ashore, moving from Piva, were VMF-222 under Maj Al Gordon and VMF-223 under Maj Bob Keller, who had replaced Marion Carl following his departure.

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The pressure continued at Rabaul, with US Marine Corps dive-bombers flying their first shipping strike to Simpson Harbor on January 14. But events far from the Solomons influenced events there. In mid February the US Navy's Fast Carrier Task Force struck directly at Truk, in the Carolines – Japan's self-proclaimed "Gibraltar of the Pacific." Unable to support two major naval-air complexes 800 miles apart, Tokyo began withdrawing ships and aircraft from Rabaul. Thereafter it was bypassed by Allied amphibious forces but not ignored by increasingly powerful air arms.

For the IJN, Rabaul became much like Guadalcanal – a graveyard of aces. From the first AirSols fighter sweep in mid December through to the climax in February, at least 30 "key fighter pilots" died defending Rabaul, including six formation leaders. One of the survivors was Lt(jg) Tetsuzo Iwamoto, who first experienced combat over China in 1938. Between November 1943 and February 1944 he claimed 40 victories flying from Rabaul, including 11 Corsairs. He survived the Darwinian winnowing through the rest of the war, confiding to his diary his personal total of 202 aerial kills. Whatever the actual figure, his mere survival was testament to his skill. Thousands of lesser Japanese aviators – and many of considerable skill – perished in Solomons skies.

On March 15, 1944 1Lt James Walley of VMF-222 shot down a "Rufe" floatplane over New Ireland. It was the last victory of the Rabaul campaign, with just one more in the Solomons for the rest of the war.

The Allies kept the pressure on Rabaul, launching missions almost every day in the last three weeks of March, weather permitting. That month Japanese shipping nearly disappeared from the harbor, although heavy barge traffic kept the garrison supplied at something above starvation level. With enemy fighters destroyed or dispersed, AA gunfire remained the only means of defense, but those numbers were finite, and Allied aircrews increasingly targeted the sites that could be seen. The Americans finally outflanked Rabaul to the north by occupying Emirau on April 29. No Japanese defended the island, which was quickly developed into a naval-air facility with two bomber runways. AirSols continued launching missions against New Britain and New Ireland throughout the rest of the war, but from the spring of 1944 the remaining Japanese forces were isolated, irrelevant and withering.

A rare incident occurred during a routine mission on June 13, 1944. 2Lt Roland Heilman of VMF-222 was patroling the coast of Kavieng with wingman Pat Dugan when he spotted a lone "Zeke" low over the bay:

> I was in position to attack as he crossed the shoreline, so we dropped on him in a steep dive. I fired a long burst which seemed to cover the area of the engine back to the cockpit. The aircraft nosed over and plunged into the water a mile offshore. The pilot did not bail out, and I do not believe he could have survived the crash.

Heilman's first victory was the last scored by a Marine in the Southwest Pacific Theater.

Rabaul Score and Leaders

The long-term campaign against Rabaul gradually wore down Japanese air power, but nowhere near as rapidly as AirSols believed.

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Robert Sherrod's excellent *History of Marine Corps Aviation in World War II* was published in 1952. It is thoroughly documented and well written, but 61 years later more information is available. In summarizing the Rabaul campaign (page 201) Sherrod accepts wartime figures of 690 AirSols aerial victories from mid December 1943 to mid February 1944. They are broken down as 393 by the Marine Corps, 166 by the US Navy, and 131 by the USAAF. Although RNZAF figures are not given, they probably totaled 40 to 50. Japanese aerial losses around Rabaul in the December-February period are cited as "nearly 400." Thus Sherrod states that AirSols fliers claimed about two victories for each Japanese shot down – a respectable margin of error in the global scheme of things.

But the daily tallies of each side's losses permit no such conclusion. The meticulous records compiled by Dr Frank Olynyk in the 1980s produce far more naval claims – 526 by US Marine Corps squadrons and 276 by US Navy Corsairs and Hellcats. Fifth and Thirteenth Air Force fighters over and near Rabaul added 84 for a total of 886. The USAAF discrepancy of 47 victories is due to claims by bomber crews.

Despite the tentative "box score" of 2.2 claims per loss, typically the Allied airmen claimed four or five victories per actual kill. The Marines, lacking the USAAF's unit-level review, largely relied upon the honor system in crediting claims. The process was wide open to error and abuse, and combined with the unavoidable confusion of air combat, the numbers raced out of all proportion. The two most notable examples were Boyington and Hanson, who typically went off by themselves, returning to report bags of three, four and five enemies. One was a highly competitive squadron commander and the other the ambitious favorite of a tolerant CO – a situation guaranteed to produce errors. It was not unknown, of course. In the Great War Capt Eddie Rickenbacker's 26 credited victories produced no more than 11 or 12 actual successes, including a grounded balloon. However, despite their common self-aggrandizement, both Rickenbacker and Boyington were effective squadron leaders who contributed significantly to their respective campaigns.

AirSols ceased to exist in June 1944, replaced by Air North Solomons numbering 23 US Marine Corps squadrons and 17 US Navy and Allied units. Of the leatherneck squadrons, eight were Corsair units controlled by the 1st MAW.

Fighter Squadron Scores, Rabaul, December 17, 1943 to February 17, 1944

Squadron	Victories	Aircraft lost
VMF-215	104	8
VMF-211	55	11
VMF-214	42	9
VMF-212	41	9
VMF-321	33	16
VMF-216	25	13
VMF-222	24	9
VMF-217	15	4
VMF-223	15	3

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VMF-218	6	5
Total	360	87

Notes

- Victories begin with the first Rabaul fighter sweep.
- Losses reflect those in the upper Solomons to all causes.

Top-Scoring US Marine Corps Pilots December 17, 1943 to February 17, 1944

Name	Unit	Guadalacanal Score	Final Score
1Lt R. M. Hanson*	VMF-215	20	25
Capt D. N. Aldrich	VMF-215	15	20
Capt H. L. Spears	VMF-215	11	15
1Lt P. C. DeLong	VMF-212	11	16
1Lt F. C. Thomas Jr	VMF-211	9	9
Maj G. Boyington**	VMF-214	8	22
1Lt E. J. Hernan Jr	VMF-215	8	8
Capt A. T. Warner	VMF-215	7	8

* Killed in Action

** Prisoner of War

Project *Danny*

One of the most intriguing aspects of US Marine Corps aviation in World War II involved events far, far removed from the Pacific. In mid June 1944 German bases in northern France began launching V1 "buzz bombs" against London and environs. The early cruise missiles were wildly inaccurate but caused widespread damage.

Project *Danny* was the US Navy/US Marine Corps portion of the broader Allied effort called Operation *Crossbow* – air attacks on V1 sites. Because the launch batteries were so small, they were both hard to find and to strike by conventional bombers. One of the options seriously considered was placing US Marine Corps F4U squadrons on escort carriers in European waters, arming the aircraft with 12.75in. Tiny Tim rockets and using them against the "doodlebug" sites. The US Navy was serious enough to assign a full Marine air group to *Danny* – five Corsair squadrons of Col Edward Pugh's MAG-51. Training proceeded on both coasts, with carrier qualifications (CQs) and specialized weapons qualification. However, low Tiny Tim production hampered pilot familiarization with the weapon.

The program soon ran afoul of more serious problems on the home front too – the "battle lines" along the Potomac River. The US Army chief of staff, Gen George C. Marshall, harbored a lingering resentment toward the US Marine Corps dating from the Battle of Belleau Wood in June 1918, when two "devil dog" regiments grabbed most of the headlines despite them serving in a US Army division. Vice Adm Patrick Bellinger, Commander Naval Air Forces Atlantic Fleet, arranged for a Joint Chiefs briefing on

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Danny, with Cdr Thomas Moorer conducting the presentation. Marshall listened to part of the briefing, then stood up. On the way out he said, "There will never be a Marine in Europe as long as I'm chief of staff."

Moorer, a future Joint Chiefs chairman, realized that the program was almost certainly doomed. He was right – *Danny* was canceled at the end of July. In addition to political infighting in Washington, D.C., it is uncertain how far the project would have proceeded. *Danny* was overtaken by events on the Continent, as Anglo-American armies had liberated most of northern France by the end of September. The squadrons resumed ordinary pre-deployment training for the Pacific instead.

CentPac

With the reduction of Rabaul, aerial combat in the Southwest Pacific became nearly extinct for the US Marine Corps. The action shifted instead to the Central Pacific (CentPac), mainly the Gilbert and Marshall islands. Before the US Marine Corps started full-scale operations in-theater, one of its squadron suffered disastrous losses in January 1944.

Maj John S. MacLaughlin's VMF-422 was based at Tarawa Atoll in the Gilberts, where two months previously the 2nd Marine Division had sustained massive casualties seizing the 300-acre island of Betio. The airfield was necessarily small and perennially crowded, and the Corsairs were wanted in position to support Operation *Flintlock* – the seizure of the Marshalls. Therefore, the admiral commanding CentPac aviation directed VMF-422 to Funafuti. The local US Marine Corps air commander was Brig Gen Lewie Merritt, a distinguished officer and aviator. For reasons still unknown, Merritt failed to provide a navigation aircraft for the 800 statute-mile flight to Funafuti, nor apparently did MacLaughlin request one. Additionally, inadequate information was provided on communications and navigation aids.

By the time 23 Corsairs took off on the morning of January 25, changing weather had closed in around Nanomea – the interim stop about 500 miles out from Tarawa. The situation turned to hash. When just 15 minutes flying time from Nanomea the formation began to splinter due to heavy cloud. MacLaughlin made an unexplained turn and disappeared. Other pilots began searching for the base, whose air traffic controllers had them on radar but could not communicate with them. A descending spiral of problems – organizational, planning and navigation – conspired in a deadly brew. Ultimately only one pilot reached Nanomea. The others bailed out or ditched together, the latter group spending two days in rubber rafts before rescue. Six Marines and 22 Corsairs were lost at no cost to the enemy.

Survivors were understandably angry – one pilot said that Merritt should have been shot. Instead, the US Marine Corps bureaucracy covered for a senior aviator's failure to provide adequate support. He was issued a letter of reprimand but his career was unaffected.

VMF-422 was rebuilt in time for the conquest of Eniwetok Atoll in early March, with Maj Elmer Wrenn assuming command. Meanwhile, Solomons ace and squadron leader Loren Everton took VMF-113 ashore, as F4Us began CAS for infantry on Wotho, Ujae and Lae Islands. After the atoll was secure, some ghastly work remained. More than 2,500 Japanese were killed at Eniwetok, and some aviation personnel were dragooned into

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disposing of the bodies. Maintenance men, including some senior non-commissioned officers, handled decaying corpses with meat hooks and deposited them onto trucks for transport to burial sites. The water table was only at a depth of five feet on some islands, so graves were uncomfortably shallow. As many as 500 bodies were dropped into one hole and bulldozed over.

Leatherneck pilots had scored only five victories in CentPac between late March 1944 and the end of October – nearly seven months with almost no aerial combat. All but one of the successes were claimed by nightfighters, with three kills being credited to VMF(N)-532 at Eniwetok and one to VMF(N)-531 in the Solomons. The fifth success took the form of a stray "Zeke" that fell prey to VMF-222 near Kavieng in June.

4th MAW Operations

The Central Pacific geography stretched hundreds of miles across open water – a potentially daunting but eventually routine flight path for US Marine Corps aircrews. With conquest of the Marshalls in February 1944, units were ready to move in almost immediately. Brig Gen Merritt's 4th MAW established its headquarters at Kwajalein in March, belatedly changing its designation from a base defense air wing to a generic (offensive) wing in November. The wing's longest serving CO was Maj Gen Louis E. Woods, veteran commander of the "Cactus Air Force." He remained in charge of the wing from August 1944 to May 1945, succeeded by Brig Gen Lawson Sanderson until VJ Day.

The 4th MAW owned three Marine air groups, with MAG-22 at Engebi, in Eniwetok Atoll, until May 1945, MAG-31 based 385 statute miles southeast at Roi, in Kwajalein Atoll, until April 1945 and MAG-13 at Majuro for the duration.

Japanese forces occupied four Marshalls atolls, Jaluit, Maloelap, Mille and Wotje. They were completely isolated but posed a possible threat in the American rear. While seemingly withering on the Pacific vine, enemy troops were kept supplied with food and AA ammunition by submarine. Taroa, the main island at Maloelap, possessed 73 automatic weapons from 6.5mm machine guns to 25mm dedicated AA guns. Distances from Marshalls bases to bypassed Japanese islands varied considerably. The shortest hop was 75 statute miles from Majuro to Mille for MAG-13, but Roi-based MAG-31 squadrons flew 370 miles to the same target. At the western end of the region, Eniwetok squadrons flew 415 miles southwest to Ponape.

The 4th MAW pilots had ample opportunity to perfect their dive-bombing techniques, whether flying F4Us or SBDs. One of the most innovative squadrons was VMF-111. Maj Frank Cole's ordnance men devised racks for half-ton bombs, increasing the Corsair's offensive potential. Mission analysis eventually showed that F4U pilots could place their bombs within 200ft of the aim point half the time – an impressive performance considering the SBD's 50 percent figure of 175ft.

One of the squadrons involved in the Marshalls grind was VMF-311, which arrived at Roi in February 1944 and began combat operations in March. Led by Midway and Guadalcanal veteran Maj Charles Kunz, the squadron experimented with various techniques. Both "clean" and "dirty" aircraft configurations were tested, "clean" being the

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most streamlined with wheels and flaps retracted and canopy closed. The squadron diarist recorded:

> At first 'clean dives' were made with the airspeed as high as 380 knots, then for about a month the diving brakes were used in an attempt to improve accuracy with the slower airspeed, bomb release at lower altitudes and greater aircraft stability. Results, however, did not seem to justify subjecting pilots and aircraft to the increased hazard of anti-aircraft fire experienced when flying low and slow, and the technique was abandoned. All dives were again clean and each pilot, knowing his angle of dive and the direction of the wind, developed his own technique for accuracy.

The squadron lost 12 Corsairs in the Marshalls, including the fighter flown by Capt Michael J. Curran Jr, who was killed by AA fire on the July 30 strike on Wotje. He was one of the squadron's old hands, having joined VMF-311 early on and briefly commanded the unit as a second lieutenant during February 1943.

Corsairs carried an increasing share of the load that year. For instance, in May 1944 they dropped 257 tons of ordnance, or 55 percent of the total, and fired 722,000 rounds of .50in. ammunition in strafing missions and flak suppression. The F4U's share of bombs dropped remained fairly steady through the summer, as all Corsair squadrons had had heavy-duty bomb racks fitted to their aircraft by July. From March to October, when the Philippines campaign began, 4th MAW Corsairs flew steadily against the CentPac target set, incurring light but steady losses. In those eight months at least 66 F4Us were lost to all causes – roughly two a week. By far the heaviest hit was Maj Grant Metzger's VMF-441, mainly based at Roi, with 15 Corsairs written off – a disproportionate 22 percent of the total among 11 squadrons in-theater. Nightfighter unit VMF(N)-532 lost six F4U-2s, but none to enemy action.

"Lindy" in the Marshalls

Among the American fliers participating in the campaign was the world's most famous pilot, Charles A. Lindbergh, who in 1927 had become the first to fly solo across the Atlantic. Although possessing a US Army colonel's commission, he was denied active duty by the vindictive Roosevelt administration, still bitter over "Lindy's" prewar isolationism. Nonetheless, Lindbergh was able to reach the combat zone as a technical representative of United Aircraft, which included Vought. Once in the Pacific he had flown missions with four MAG-14 Corsair squadrons in the upper Solomons, including Joe Foss's VMF-115. Marion Carl also flew with the methodical Lindbergh, remarking:

> He was a very good pilot and he knew an awful lot about the Corsair. But the thing that bothered us was that he was so darned slow. He'd spend 30 minutes inspecting his plane and warming up the engine. We spoke to him about it but it never did any good. You just couldn't get Lindbergh to take off before he was good and ready.

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Now in the Central Pacific, the 42-year-old legend began testing the limits of the Corsair's offensive potential. Lindbergh enjoyed the hospitality of MAG-31 at Roi-Namur, where Col Calvin Freeman was receptive to the visitor's requests to fly. On his first mission, targeting Taroa Island in Maloelap Atoll on September 2, the F4Us carried 1,000lb bombs. Lindbergh reported:

> Our target was a personnel area located by Intelligence from recent low-altitude photographs. We started our dive at 8,000ft and released at 3,000ft – angle about 60 degrees, and no dive brakes. Most of our bombs landed in or near the area, starting one fuel fire. We encountered moderate and accurate small-arms fire from the ground. The Japanese gunners are still bringing down our planes occasionally.

The next day the US Marine Corps upped the ordnance load to 3,000lb for the first time. Lindbergh recorded:

> Plane took off easily. Took off ahead of squadrons and cruised at maximum economy to Wotje Atoll. Rendezvoused with squadrons a few minutes after I arrived. I made one run for each of the three bombs, starting at 8,000ft and releasing at 3,000ft. Target – Japanese naval gun positions on shore of Wotje Island.

Encouraged with the results, Lindbergh worked with MAG-31 ordnance officers at increasing the Corsair's payload. Since three half-ton bombs had posed no problems, he reckoned that a 2,000-pounder would work. A flight test showed a need to reinforce the experimental bomb rack, and the work progressed quickly. On September 8 Lindbergh wrote:

> Started dive downwind from 8,000ft – shallower than usual – to be sure the 2,000lb bomb would miss the propeller. Released at 3,000ft and pulled up quickly, as I was directly over the anti-aircraft installations. Bomb hit about 100 yards southeast of building, wiping out several small structures and throwing a huge column of smoke and debris into the air. So far as we know, this is the first time a 2,000lb has been dropped by a fighter.

Lindbergh remained with MAG-31 until September 14 when he departed for home. Impressed with what he had experienced in the Solomons and Marshalls, he told his diary, "The more I see of the Marines the more I like them."

Wartime Expansion

The US Navy's wartime flight training program dated from December 16, 1941 when President Roosevelt realized that producing 600 aviators a month was insufficient. The new scheme required 2,500 students per month by the summer of 1943, with a commensurate increase in training aircraft. Educational requirements for military pilots steadily lowered throughout the war, although the USAAF required more personnel and therefore accepted men with relatively less schooling, whereas the US Navy maintained a

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minimum of two years of college early on. However, by mid 1943 pilots were being commissioned at 19 and 20 years of age.

Naval Aviation training proceeded apace, manpower requirements generally being based on a 25 percent attrition or washout rate. However, in mid 1944 the US Navy realized that combat and operational losses were running behind expectations, leading to an aviator surplus. That summer plans were enacted to reduce the number of primary training bases to five by year-end. Many student pilots caught in the force reduction chose to become aircrewmen instead. Others were involuntarily "deselected" and sent to non-aviation positions. Many of those remaining would receive expanded training before going to operational training units.

US Marine Corps fighter squadrons proliferated in 1942-43, sometimes sub-dividing almost amoeba-like as cadres were stripped off from barely established units to form new ones. It added 12 VMFs in 1942, establishing standouts such as VMF-212, VMF-223 and VMF-224 at Ewa in Hawaii. Stateside production included the first nightfighter unit, VMF(N)-531, at Cherry Point. Sixteen new fighter squadrons were spawned in 1943, mainly due to a sprint that produced nine at Cherry Point alone. The North Carolina production line included the next three nightfighter units. A record 28 US Marine Corps fighter squadrons emerged in 1944, including eight 900-series units intended to fly F7F Tigercats. However, four that stood up on the East Coast that summer were deactivated in the fall.

Naval Aviation looked hard at itself that summer and concluded that personnel planning was overly ambitious. Pilot training was cut back as expected attrition failed to materialize.

Meanwhile, a temporary adjustment occurred in a few US Marine Corps squadrons. From October 1944 to early 1945 six scout-bomber squadrons converted to bombing-fighting units and then back to VMSBs. During their brief VMBF iterations the squadrons transitioned to Corsairs, before exchanging them for Dauntlesses or Helldivers. Three were deployed during that period – VMBF-231, VMBF-331 and VMBF-333 in the Central Pacific. The US Marine Corps' distinction of fighter from fighter-bomber units anticipated the US Navy's wider use of the VBF designation when shipboard fighter squadrons were expanded in early 1945.

Peleliu

The grinding, sanguinary battle of Peleliu had its origin in the end of World War I when Japan received most of Germany's North Pacific holdings. That included the Palau Islands, with phosphate mining a primary feature from the 1920s, although the remote location (more than 500 miles east of the Philippines) complicated transport of the product. For the US Marine Corps, Peleliu was about as bad as it got – a sweltering, oppressive climate seven degrees north of the Equator, some of the toughest defensive terrain in the Pacific and a highly motivated enemy typically tenacious in defense.

Seizing Peleliu was probably unnecessary, as the Joint Chiefs' concern about covering the eastern flank of the Philippine landings seems unwarranted in retrospect. The Palaus were increasingly isolated from seaborne communication, and replacement aircraft could no longer be ferried in from the Marianas. The 1,300-mile flight from Iwo Jima was also less and

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less of an option. Nevertheless, the landings (Operation *Stalemate II*) proceeded on September 15, 1944. The operation, expected to take a few days, stretched into nearly two-and-a-half months. Of the 10,900 Japanese on the island, only 202 were captured. Conversely, the 28,500 Marines and GIs took 9,800 casualties – nearly a one-to-one ratio with the Japanese. Infantry losses were so heavy that some aviation personnel were drafted into vacancies. The 1st Marine Division suffered nearly 80 percent casualties among communications personnel, so telephone operators from some squadrons were transferred to the "mud marines."

Cpl Don Johnson of MAG-11 recalled:

> I landed on Peleliu's Purple Beach on September 23, 1944 with the Headquarters and Service Squadron. We hiked to the hangar area on the north side of the airport in the pouring rain. About two days later, after trying to set up our camping area, I was one of several telephone communication guys asked to go and help out the 1st Marine Division with its telephone system. It had had a devastating amount of casualties after landing on Orange and White Beach, and had only ten out of the original 60 telephone men left. I worked with the 1st Marine Division until it was relieved by the 81st Army Division on October 30. I then helped set up the island's permanent communications system. The Marine Corps, Navy and Army worked together under the Island command, which was headed up by an Army Captain. I don't recall his name but he was a 20-year man that had come up through the ranks, and everyone liked and respected him.

After a hard-fought two-day battle the US Marine Corps secured a perimeter, permitting Stinson OY-1 Army (L-5) observation airplanes to land on D+4. They provided aerial observation for artillery, which was increasingly needed against deeply entrenched Japanese troops.

Maj Gen James T. Moore's 2nd MAW had responsibility for the western Carolines, with further duty as amphibious operations dictated. Therefore, he delegated Col Caleb Bailey's MAG-11 as Peleliu's aviation unit, and personally oversaw the early phase of the operation. Moore's Curtiss R5C transport landed with a nightfighter contingent on September 24, as Maj Peter Lambrecht's VMF(N)-541 alit with Hellcats. They had precious little to occupy them for the moment, but would find steady employment in the Philippines campaign.

Sea Bees worked industriously to extend the fighter strip to 3,800ft in time for the first Corsairs to arrive, which belonged to VMF-114. The unit was led by Guadalcanal veteran Maj Robert F. "Cowboy" Stout, who was a well regarded leader – an ace with no more aerial opponents, but a believer in the emerging concept of CAS. With ample time for training, he had led the squadron for a full year.

The Japanese had had years to prepare Peleliu, and by mid 1944 they were solidly entrenched in underground bunkers and at least 500 caves. Most were impervious to bombing and strafing, leaving napalm as the most effective aviation ordnance. The "hell jelly" burned off concealing foliage but seldom reached the defenders directly. However, in some instances, the high-intensity flames might suffocate personnel near the entrances.

On September 28 VMF-114 alternated with artillery in suppressing Japanese defenses on Ngesebus, a small island a quarter-mile off Peleliu's northern coast. After dive-bombing

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visible positions the Corsairs nearly scraped their bellies delivering close-range .50in. fire. US Marine Corps generals observing from across the narrow strait noted F4Us recovering from their runs as low as 50ft.

Stout's squadron received reinforcement when VMF-122 arrived on October 21, led by the colorful Maj Hunter Reinburg.

Under Maj Walter Mayer VMF-121 returned to the South Pacific in August 1944 but logged almost no aerial combat. The squadron's 23 Corsairs landed at Peleliu on October 25, and they were mainly based there for most of the following 12 months. Mayer's squadron even provided stretcher bearers for the hard-pressed, under-strength infantry.

Peleliu Corsairs undoubtedly flew the shortest combat missions of the war. The northern end of the long runway was only 2,000 yards from Umerbrogol Mountain's rocky crest, with the southern slope being much closer. Therefore, some pilots did not bother to raise their wheels during the brief sorties. In fact, sometimes they spent more time in the traffic pattern than over the target. Apart from bombing and strafing known or suspected Japanese positions, the Corsairs flew repeated "barge sweeps" in the Palaus, denting the persistent enemy's coastal supply runs.

An Avenger squadron, VMTB-134, augmented the three F4U outfits at the end of September.

The Palau campaign continued until war's end, with 55 Corsairs lost to all causes from September to VJ Day. The heaviest losses occurred in March 1945, with ten F4Us downed. Six came from VMF-114, including "Cowboy" Stout, killed by AA fire over Koror Island. He was not quite 27 years old.

The Philippines

In March 1942, upon being driven from the Philippines, Gen Douglas MacArthur famously asserted, "I shall return." Two-and-a-half years later he did so, but he required some help. In late 1944 the doggerel soon caught on:

"With the help of God and a few Marines MacArthur returned to the Philippines."

Four MAGs participated in the re-conquest of the islands, two each with SBDs and F4Us. Knowing that they would be operating with US Army infantry, the leathernecks trained intensively for the event.

The Philippines provided the arena where US Marine Corps CAS approached its potential. More than anyone else, the officer responsible was then Lt Col Keith B. McCutcheon, operations officer of MAG-24. Marine aviators had performed direct infantry support at Guadalcanal and Bougainville in 1942-43. The former was slapdash and erratic while the latter, although far better organized, remained a small effort resulting in some friendly fire casualties. US Army observers concluded that US Marine Corps-style CAS was undesirable. The US Army's institutional attitude may have been dismissed by some leathernecks, but in the Philippines the two services operated jointly. Consequently, McCutcheon fought a two-front war – getting his squadrons properly trained in CAS, and convincing the GI generals that Marine performance could match the brochure.

The basis of US Marine Corps CAS was the air liaison party (ALP), which was usually led by an aviator in command of several radio operators and technicians. Reliable

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communication was essential, even with standardized signals (smoke or recognition panels) between air and ground elements. ALPs were assigned from battalion level up to division, providing overlapping direction of fighter-bombers and redundancy as a hedge against inevitable communication problems. In less than 90 days McCutcheon's training regime produced 500 soldiers and Marines cross-trained in a daunting variety of subjects ranging from Japanese psychology to communication procedures and ordnance delivery techniques.

Overseeing ALPs were the air support control unit (ASCU) and the air coordinator. The ASCU responded to infantry requests for support, prioritized them and passed them to the airborne coordinator in the desired area.

By far the greatest portion of Marine CAS in the Philippines was performed by SBD squadrons. In fact, Dauntlesses made history by guarding one flank of the 1st Cavalry Division's advance on Manila. But the same techniques developed in support of the Sixth Army paid dividends downstream.

Concluding his work, McCutcheon said, "You can lead a plane to a strike with anything from a radio jeep to a mirror, but MAG-24 found that closer air and ground liaison meant better hunting."

Largely idle at Emirau, Col William A. Willis' MAG-12 considered itself underemployed and ill appreciated by the Fifth Air Force, so when Adm William F. Halsey learned of the group's availability, he commended it to Gen MacArthur. At Peleliu the "Bat Eyes" of VMF(N)-541 responded to MacArthur's request for help when Japanese fighters began flying bombing missions. The USAAF's P-61 Black Widow, while a potent, capable aircraft, often lacked the low-altitude speed to cope with the intruders. Consequently, Lt Col Pete Lambrecht's Night Hellcats flew nearly 700 statute miles from Palau to Tacloban, on northeast Leyte. They landed on December 3, followed by maintenance and support crews.

The rest of MAG-12 landed within two days – 75 Corsairs of VMF-115, VMF-211, VMF-218 and VMF-313. Theirs was an epic transpacific trek of nearly 2,000 nautical miles from Emirau to Hollandia, in New Guinea, then to Peleliu and on to the Philippines. Guided by PBJ Mitchell bombers, the F4U pilots experienced little difficulty en route – proof of the concept of flying single-engined fighters long distances over water. Gone were the days of VMF-422's January debacle. Further proof of inter-service cooperation was provided when US Marine Corps and USAAF transport aircraft lifted the four squadrons' ground echelons. The group commander, Col Willis, was well qualified to organize the move, having led MAG-25, the US Marine Corps' dedicated transport command.

Tacloban left much to be desired. The runway was incomplete and narrow (only 70ft wide), with insufficient parking space. The US Army had assumed that US Marine Corps aircraft would have folding wings, but most of the Corsairs were "stiff wing" Goodyear FG-1s. Heavy rain produced thick, cloying mud that caused additional problems. Occasionally, Japanese bombing raids also inflicted losses. Nevertheless, the F4Us immediately made themselves known. On December 5, capping a task group off Leyte, VMF-115 intercepted several "Zekes" targeting the ships. 1Lt Johnny Lindley pounced on a Mitsubishi pulling out of its attack run and sent it down smoking from 13,000ft. A nearby P-38 Lightning pilot confirmed the victory.

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Corsairs against Ships

US Marine Corps pilots were trained in glide-bombing, and observed December 7, 1944 with repeated attacks against a Japanese convoy of five transports with three escorts. The convoy sought shelter at San Isidro Harbor on Leyte but could not avoid detection. VMF-211 launched three divisions, expecting USAAF fighters to provide top cover, but the P-40s never showed. Nonetheless, Maj Stan Witomski took his 12 Corsairs down to attack, some engaging "Zekes" en route. Enemy gunners and interceptors downed three Corsairs, with only Witomski surviving from his four-aircraft division. As the others pulled off, one ship was burning along most of its length, nearly dead in the water.

That afternoon VMF-211 was back with elements of VMF-218 and VMF-313 – 21 Corsairs in all – plus Fifth Air Force fighters. The massed strike produced results, as VMF-218's four pilots all claimed 1,000-pounder hits that destroyed one ship, while the other F4Us added three more. Postwar assessment credited five ship kills (the USAAF, somewhat typically, claimed 13), with four attributed to the US Marine Corps.

The group sent elements of all four squadrons against a Japanese convoy off the coast of Panay on December 11. The Corsairs nosed down, executing glide-bombing attacks with half-ton bombs that damaged a large transport. 1Lt William Rainalter splashed an "Oscar" that tried to interfere but his plane was hit by American AA fire. He bailed out and, fortuitously, was rescued by friendly natives on Sambulawan.

Later that day MAG-12 returned to the convoy, participating in a joint operation that would have made any Solomons aviator feel at home. In fact, Guadalcanal ace Capt Roger Haberman, formerly of Joe Foss' "flying circus," was VMF-211's operations officer. He briefed the mission, involving 28 Corsairs with 1000-pounders and 30 P-40s with 500-pounders. The mission report said:

> When the ships were sighted the Army started peeling off in groups of two and three planes and dove from 10,000ft to about 5,000ft, released bombs and pulled back through the overcast. They accomplished nothing except to make interesting splashes in the water and wake up the Japs. AA immediately became very intense. As the last Army bombs were falling our Corsairs were in position and coming in fast and low. The Japs never saw us coming until we started to shoot – we received no fire until past the screening destroyers.

The gull-winged attackers got away clean, claiming six hits with two troop transports sunk. "Zekes" appeared during the attack, with 2Lt Michael Gudor pressing a head-on run to minimum range, and then some. His prop stopped and he lost part of his rudder and port stabilizer. "At 800ft I leveled the plane and bailed out into the sea. During the night the convoy we had hit was burning and the explosions rent the air about ten miles to the southeast of me. The next day at about 5pm a beautiful Navy PBY set down on the sea and picked me up."

The convoy battles of the 11th remained the Marines' biggest day of Philippine air combat, with VMF-211, VMF-218 and VMF-313 contributing to the total of 19 confirmed victories.

The next day VMF(N)-541's Night Hellcats did double duty in daylight, claiming 11 kills off Leyte's west coast while protecting a convoy from air attack. Lambrecht's planes sustained no battle damage, although upon landing one Hellcat's wingtip was clipped by an

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errant P-47 Thunderbolt. Despite the F6Fs piling up numerous victories, the pilots were discontent at working with strangers – US Army controllers with little understanding of nightfighter tactics or procedures. In one notorious incident a "Bat Eye" pilot was given a reciprocal heading opposite of that intended and he soon realized he was lost. However, he got himself "unlost" and returned to base, unconvinced of the benefit of joint operations.

Meanwhile, that same day (December 12) anti-shipping strikes continued, with Corsairs claiming the destroyer *Uzuki* sunk off Cebu. However, US Navy and Japanese records indicate that the 1,400-ton ship was shared with PT boats.

On February 23, 1945 VMF-115's exec, Maj Eldon Railsback, and his division sighted two small Japanese submarines surfaced in Cebu Harbor. The F4Us attacked with bombs but missed, so they raced back to base to rearm. Returning to Cebu, they found the same submarines. This time they pressed their low-level attacks to paint-scraping height – as low as 25ft. Reportedly one bomb was skipped into a target, resulting in a claim for a sinking, although Japanese records offer no proof.

Corsairs provided more services than just air defense and CAS. In March 1945 VMF-115 met an Eighth Army request to assist guerrilla operations on the southernmost island, Mindanao. The visitors earned their keep by strafing Japanese units threatening guerrilla positions on Cebu. Shortly thereafter the squadron was reassembled at its new Zamboanga base – storied in naval lore as the place where the monkeys have no tails.

A record of sorts was set on March 27 when VMF-115's 1Lt Winfield Sharpe sat on the lap of US Army Maj Donald Willis to locate hidden Japanese positions that the latter had previously spotted. If ever there was a completely joint operation, this sortie from Dipolog airstrip fitted the description. Lacking radio communication with the guerrillas, Willis' improvised method produced results. Sharpe made the first pass at the target, allowing his three wingmen to complete the job. The remaining Japanese pulled back, relieving the pressure on the Filipino guerrillas.

Later that month Col Willis turned over MAG-12 to Col Verne McCaul, who remained for the duration. Old-timers knew McCaul as the CO of VMF-221 before Midway.

Meanwhile, reinforcements had arrived in January 1945 as Col Zebulon Hopkins' MAG-14 flew to Samar. VMF-212, VMF-222, VMF-223 and VMF-251 were based at Guiuan airstrip, where facilities were poor even by US Marine Corps expeditionary standards. The runway was still being bulldozed, leaving insufficient room to park aircraft. Five VMF-223 fighters were damaged on takeoff or landing, at least partly due to the incomplete runway. Nevertheless, the Corsairs lost little time beginning sweeps to southern Luzon, Lingayan, Cebu, Mindanao, Negros and other islands.

Amid the press of operations, some administrative tasks were inevitable. The long-serving VMO-251 was changed to VMF at the end of January and led by Midway survivor Maj Bill Humberd. The redesignation only reflected reality, as the squadron had long functioned in the fighter role with few observation missions. In any case, the squadron was deactivated on June 1, 1945.

Hopkins' squadrons flew a variety of missions to Negros, Mindanao, Cebu and Leyte, answering US Army and Filipino requests. For instance, VMF-212 under Maj Quinton R. Johnson provided CAS during March and April. Most of the missions supported the US Army's 40th Infantry Division in Operation *Victor* on Negros. The GIs appreciated

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Marine-style CAS, but it came at a cost. VMF-223, for instance, lost four pilots early in its time ashore. Losses also occurred close to home. On January 24 a VMF-222 pilot blew a tire on takeoff from the rough Guinan strip and lost control of his plane. The errant Corsair careened through the housing area shared with VMF-212, destroying facilities for oxygen, parachutes and materiel, as well as the intelligence shop. Marines rushed to save the pilot from the burning F4U but it exploded, igniting 2,400 rounds of machine gun ammunition. In all, 14 men were killed and 50+ wounded.

While USAAF aces played out their rivalry (Maj Richard Bong scored 12 victories in the Philippines and Maj Thomas McGuire 17 before being killed) US Marine Corps fighter pilots had far less opportunity. Between December and March, MAG-12 F4Us and F6Fs claimed 58 aerial victories, led by VMF(N)-541 with 22 – all in daylight. Corsairs of VMF-115, VMF-211, VMF-218 and VMF-313 contributed 36 more. Leading MAG-12's 48 victorious pilots were the "Bat Eyes'" TSgt John Andre and Lt Harold Hayes with four each.

MAG-14 pilots had very few enemy aircraft sightings and claimed no kills. However, the group wrote off 63 Corsairs through May 1945, by which time some squadrons had shifted to Okinawa.

Fighter Squadron Aerial Victories, Philippines Campaign, December 1944 to January 1945

Unit	Score
VMF(N)-541	22
VMF-211	11
VMF-218	10.5
VMF-313	9
VMF-115	6.5
Total	59

Leading US Aces as of December 1944

Name	Service	Score
Maj Richard I. Bong	USAAF	40
Maj Thomas B. McGuire	USAAF	38
Cdr David McCampbell	US Navy	34
Lt Col Francis S. Gabreski**	USAAF	28
Maj Robert S. Johnson	USAAF	27
Maj George E. Preddy*	USAAF	26.833
Maj Joseph J. Foss	USMC	26
Capt Robert M. Hanson*	USMC	25
Maj Gregory Boyington**	USMC	24 (2 AVG)
Col Charles H. MacDonald	USAAF	24

* Killed in Action

** Prisoner of War

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US Marine Corps On Carriers

Although wearing the golden wings of Naval Aviators, US Marine Corps pilots only occasionally flew from aircraft carriers before World War II. Two under-strength scouting squadrons had operated from *Lexington* and *Saratoga* in the early 1930s, and another was briefly assigned to USS *Langley* (CV-1). From 1935, leatherneck fighting, bombing and scouting units cycled through carrier qualification (CQ) periods, but more as a contingency than as part of a particular US Navy carrier air group.

Hand in glove with US Marine Corps carrier squadrons were landing signal officers (LSOs). Few leatherneck LSOs were trained before the war, but two became famous. Bob Galer and Ken Walsh qualified as "paddles" and went on to receive Medals of Honor for combat in the Solomons.

In 1943 Naval Air Forces Pacific noted that Marines comprised one-third of the aviators qualifying as carrier pilots. Since, with one small exception, no US Marine Corps squadrons were deploying in flattops, the requirement was dropped.

Marines made one brief deployment in 1943, supporting US Army troops recapturing Attu, in the Aleutians. USS *Nassau* (CVE-16) embarked 26 F4F-4s and three US Marine Corps F4F-3Ps of VMO-155, the latter being flown by six pilots and maintained by nine enlisted men. One Wildcat and pilot were lost on May 15. The embarked US Navy fighter pilots were trained in CAS by US Marine Corps officers and, although poor weather hampered operations, the groundwork had been laid for CAS in the fleet.

A year-and-a-half later a crisis hit. In October 1944 the first kamikaze missions shocked the Pacific Fleet into a chilling realization – more fighter squadrons and therefore fighter pilots were needed in the Western Pacific. The "purge" of that summer was abruptly reversed, but months were required to make up the deficit. An immediate increase in fighters (from 54 to 73) was instituted for *Essex* class carriers, reducing the number of dive-bombers and torpedo planes to 15 each so as to make room on flightdecks for the extra Corsairs and Hellcats. Therefore, until more US Navy fighter pilots were trained, Marines would fill the gap.

Two F4U squadrons were available in Hawaii for early embarkation, VMF-124 and VMF-213 reaching the huge anchorage at Ulithi on December 28. Senior among the 54 pilots was Lt Col Bill Millington, CO of VMF-124. The leathernecks averaged 12 carrier landings in Hawaii, but only eight of the pilots had combat experience. However, Millington considered his 120 mechanics fully up to the challenge. Many had coped with chronic problems of supply and maintenance during the Solomons campaign, so a carrier's well-stocked storerooms looked lavish by comparison.

Embarked in USS *Essex* (CV-9) with Carrier Air Group (CVG) 4, the Marines sailed on December 30, 1944 with Task Force (TF) 38. Despite briefings and practice with the LSOs, two pilots and three F4Us were lost in the first two days at sea. Worse was to come. First combat occurred on January 3, 1945 with strikes on Okinawa. Millington claimed the first kill by carrier-based Marines, but one pilot succumbed to navigation error. Another disappeared the next day in heavy weather. After nine days of fleet operations the *Essex* leathernecks had lost seven pilots and 13 Corsairs. By comparison, CVG-4's VF-4 had not lost a single Hellcat to weather or operational causes during the same period. These preventable losses highlighted the need for increased instrument training among Marine pilots.

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On January 12 the fast carriers struck Japanese naval and air bases in French Indochina. The Corsairs shot up a dozen planes on the ground, losing one in the process, although the pilot returned to Allied control. The day's most tragic loss was a China-based B-24 that inexplicably failed to heed radio and visual challenges from the Corsair CAP. When the Marines were fired upon they attacked the unmarked bomber, which seemed to them to be flown by the enemy. The four Marines returned fire, destroying the Liberator, which, in fact, belonged to the Fourteenth Air Force.

Exiting the South China Sea within range of Formosa, the task force was attacked on January 20 and 21. *Essex* F4Us claimed eight victories but USS *Ticonderoga* (CV-14) suffered heavy damage.

When the fast carriers sortied again in February three more ships embarked US Marine Corps squadrons. VMF-112 and VMF-123 sailed in USS *Bennington* (CV-20), VMF-216 and VMF-217 joined USS *Wasp* (CV-18) and USS *Bunker Hill* (CV-17) became the first ship to embark three Corsair squadrons, namely VF-84, VMF-221 and VMF-451. The eight US Marine Corps squadrons totaled 133 F4Us or FG-1s and 216 pilots – one sixth of the fast carriers' fighter strength. The new units had received intensive carrier and instrument refresher training and would be spared the operational losses that plagued Millington's men.

When Cdr Otto Klinsmann, the *Essex* carrier air group commander (CAG), was shot down in the South China Sea, Bill Millington "fleeted up." He was the first Marine to command a US Navy carrier air group. Millington recalled the Marines' introduction to fast carrier warfare:

> We were warned about the kamikazes – indeed, the *Essex* had been hit by one just before our cruise. We would have to shoot them down before they reached the fleet for it was their tactics that were doing the most damage. As a result, we abandoned defensive tactics when we went after the kamikazes. The Navy really feared them, more so than the Marines. They used destroyers as pickets and we flew CAP over them. The kamikazes would go after the pickets, these being the first ships they came across. By the time of the Okinawa operation they were no longer trying to establish air superiority, merely trying to destroy ships with kamikaze tactics.

In *Bunker Hill* some Marines learned an expensive lesson about US Navy expertise that had nothing to do with aviation. CVG-84 had some deadly poker players, including CAG Roger Hedrick, who had raked in an impressive $262 between CAPs. Maj Herbert "Trigger" Long of VMF-451 ruefully recalled, "Hank Ellis and I were invited to one of their sessions, and we didn't even have time to warm up the chairs before we were both flat broke!"

The February fast carrier strikes were among the most ambitious to date. During mid-month the task force struck the enemy home islands, launching missions over Tokyo itself. The weather precluded a full-scale application of air power, however, and strikes were canceled on the 17th – the second day of the operation. The Marines claimed 21 aerial victories and 60 strafing victories, losing nine F4Us and six pilots in the process. Especially hard hit was *Bennington's* VMF-123, as AA fire knocked down

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three Corsairs, although two pilots were rescued. The skipper of VMF-217, Maj Jack Amende, fell to a "Zeke" and three other *Wasp* Corsairs were lost – one on launch. Recalling the Tokyo strikes, Lt Col Millington explained:

> Our offensive fighter sweeps against enemy airfields were conducted without external ordnance – we just used our guns. When attacking airfields we would go in en masse to dilute the AA fire. Sometimes we would do a second sweep, depending on the defenses, dividing the airfield up and each flight taking a different segment. Later, we conducted ground attack missions using rockets and bombs.

The first carrier strikes against Japan were significant in that Naval Aviation had taken the war to the enemy homeland. But more important to Marine aviation was the tactical support given assault troops at Iwo Jima. Bill Millington, as CAG-4, had helped prepare the CAS plan and led the D-Day mission on 19 February. The *Essex* group commander took 24 F4Us and 24 F6Fs down on the beaches in a well-timed operation coordinated with naval gunfire. Napalm, rockets and liberal strafing helped suppress Japanese defenses as the aviators fired barely 200 yards ahead of the infantry. Ground commanders gratefully noted that full enemy resistance did not arise until after the Marines were ashore.

The fast carriers continued supporting the bloody struggle ashore until D+3. Then it was back to Japan on February 25, where deteriorating weather blocked effective air operations. Of nine carrier planes lost, two were *Bennington* Marines, including Maj Everett Alward of VMF-123.

Upon return to Ulithi in early March *Essex* and *Wasp* lost their leathernecks as CVG-4 and CVG-81 rotated home. However, 75 experienced Marine mechanics volunteered to remain in the two carriers, lending their knowledge of Corsair maintenance. Joining the task force were two more Marine outfits, VMF-214 and VMF-452 with USS *Franklin* (CV-13) and CVG-5. Operations began off Kyushu on March 18, the vessel's primary targets being enemy airfields as TF 58 fliers claimed more than 100 shootdowns. The Marines bagged 14 for the loss of three.

The next day proved to be a shambles. Sailing within 60 miles of Shikoku, the fast carriers drew conventional and suicide attacks. With 31 planes on deck, *Franklin* was hit by a pair of 550lb bombs. "Big Ben" went dead in the water for almost four hours before finally being towed out of range of enemy aircraft. Sixty-five Marines were among the 800 dead, as VMF-214 and VMF-452 were knocked out of the war on their second day of carrier combat.

Bennington and *Bunker Hill* Marines got on with the war. That day Maj Herman Hansen of VMF-112 led four divisions against a formation of 20 "Zekes" near Kanoya, claiming nine kills without loss. VMF-123, however, was engaged in a running fight against stiff odds, losing three against a claim of nine. Three more F4Us were jettisoned after landing with extensive battle damage. A stellar performance was logged by Capt William A. Cantrel, a Solomons veteran who, although badly wounded in one foot, stayed in the fight, downed two assailants and organized cover for the withdrawal. He received a well deserved Navy Cross.

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Carriers off Okinawa

With the invasion of Okinawa on April 1 the fast carriers met a succession of determined Japanese air attacks. The big kamikaze raids of the 6th and 12th brought dramatic opportunities to engage enemy aircraft. If not typical, at least Maj Hansen's experience of the 12th was representative. The VMF-112 skipper celebrated his 25th birthday with a triple kill, becoming an ace and earning a Navy Cross – a full day's work for a former photo pilot.

Bunker Hill was also heard from. Maj Archie Donahue of VMF-451 accounted for five of CVG-84's 25 shootdowns, becoming the US Marine Corps' only carrier-based ace in a day.

However, with good hunting came high risk. On May 11 *Bunker Hill* was ravaged by two bombs and two suiciders. She was engulfed in gasoline fires and capable of only ten knots. Twenty-eight enlisted Marines and one pilot died. Fifteen airborne leathernecks watched the conflagration, awed by the spectacle, although Capt Jim Swett caught an attacker before recovering aboard *Enterprise*. Thus, the Solomons Medal of Honor recipient ran his record to 15.5 victories.

In three months of combat VMF-221 and VMF-451 had lost 13 pilots and destroyed 84 Japanese planes.

Bennington remained on the line until June 8, spending nearly four months in almost continuous operations. VMF-112 and VMF-123 claimed 82 shootdowns plus 149 planes destroyed on the ground, but losses were high. Eighteen pilots were killed in action – one pilot in three. Forty-eight F4Us were lost (31 in combat) and another 41 were transferred out with damage.

While the ten Corsair squadrons formed the bulk of the US Marine Corps' contribution to carrier aviation in the war, a smaller group also logged flattop service. At least 13 Marine aviators flew with US Navy squadrons, including eight with CVG-10 in USS *Intrepid* (CV-11). Their appearance was accidental – a personnel officer thought that "Evil I" needed replacement Marines when in fact none were aboard! But CAG-10 Cdr John Hyland had no prejudice – perhaps he was looking for "a few good men." In their brief time aboard the eight Marines shot down ten bandits and helped sink the 64,000-ton battleship *Yamato* on April 7, 1945. One pilot was killed before the detachment left *Intrepid*.

The other five wandering leathernecks flew with CVG-85 in USS *Shangri-La* (CV-38). Originally assigned as escort carrier pilots, they soon rejoined their friends in VMF-512 aboard USS *Gilbert Islands* (CVE-107) at Leyte in June. They were embarked in "Shang" for only two weeks, mainly flying against kamikaze bases during that time.

Baby Flattops

The final chapter in the story of US Marine Corps carrier experience in World War II was the escort carrier (CVE) program under Col Albert D. Cooley. When the first F4U squadrons joined the fast carriers the project was already underway, as noted in the Chief of Naval Operations' dispatch to Pacific Fleet Commander Chester Nimitz. It said in part:

> You are further authorized to proceed with training Marine fighter squadrons for deployment in assault CVEs to relieve Navy pilots and personnel required for fast carrier

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> groups. Keep me informed of number of Marine squadrons to be assigned fast carriers and make recommendations for substituting Marine squadrons in combat CVEs.

On October 21, 1944 Marine Carrier Groups, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, was established at MCAS Santa Barbara, California. The command was comprised of two groups at Santa Barbara and Mojave. Two weeks later they were designated Marine Air Support Group (MASG) 48 and MASG-51. Each support group was to be composed of four Marine carrier air groups (MCVG), each with an 18-plane fighter squadron and a 12-plane torpedo-bomber squadron. The squadrons were to be deployed aboard four escort carriers, with an additional two CVEs of US Navy squadrons, to form an escort carrier division. The all-US Navy ships' task was anti-submarine and combat air patrols, while the US Marine Corps units provided air support for Marine landing forces. All groundcrews were organized into carrier aircraft service detachments (CASDs) indigenous to each MCVG.

The goal of the US Marine Corps' CVE program was to provide 16 Marine carrier air groups simultaneously, plus spare groups. A full complement would be 540 fighters and 360 TBM Avengers for the deploying and backup or spare Marine carrier air groups.

By early 1945 the first "all Marine" carrier was ready – USS *Block Island* (CVE-106), embarking VMF-511 and VMTB-233 in MCVG-1. The other three were assigned at one-month intervals, MCVG-2 in *Gilbert Islands*, MCVG-3 in USS *Vella Gulf* (CVE-111) and MCVG-4 in USS *Cape Gloucester* (CVE-109). They merged with the US Navy units in USS *Kula Gulf* (CVE-108) and USS *Siboney* (CVE-112) in May 1945.

As always, maintenance loomed large. Some of the "downstream" fighter squadrons were slated to receive F6F Hellcats or even F8F Bearcats. Experience had shown that sustained operations taxed F4U squadrons because of the Corsair's complex oil and hydraulic systems. Deferred maintenance often was not possible, resulting in fewer sorties per aircraft compared to F6Fs. The operational CVE carrier air groups deployed with F4U fighter-bombers, F6F-5P photo-reconnaissance aircraft and F6F-5N nightfighters.

Among the pilots in MCVG-1 was Maj Bruce Porter, CO of VMF-511, which was expected to conduct nightfighter missions from *Block Island*. After a highly successful Solomons tour the 24-year-old Californian anticipated his greatest challenge yet – flying fighters from small-deck carriers at night. The squadron began night "car quals" in Hawaii early in 1945, and Porter recalled the evolution beginning with his F6F-5N hitched to USS *Tripoli's* (CVE-64) hydraulic catapult:

> I looked to my left and saluted. Ready! In response, a dimly perceived deck hand standing over the catapult crew's catwalk whirled a flashlight. Go! I turned my eyes front, loosened my grip on the stick, set my jaw and leaned back into my seat.
>
> 'WHAM!'
>
> My conscious mind was eons behind my senses. I had a very busy couple of seconds as I kicked the right rudder pedal and yanked the stick into the pit of my stomach. I had no time to dwell on how dark it was out there.
>
> All my training and experience saw me through a climb to 3,000ft. While my mind reeled off a thousand facts about my flying, my voice talked to the ship in calm tones, reporting on routine matters. I was neither here nor there.

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> After assuring myself that I was flying on a heading opposite of that of the ship, I flew down the carrier's port side and approached the plane guard destroyer, keeping it just off my port wing. I could not help ruminating about how useless a night search for a bilged aviator must be. Next, I flicked on my radio altimeter, a brand new instrument that had been installed just before we left San Diego. I set it for 150ft. If I flew above that altitude I'd get a white signal light. If I flew below I'd get a red – danger! If I was flying right at 150ft I'd get a comforting green light. It was green when I turned the altimeter on.
>
> I flew upwind the length of the tiny destroyer and sighted her deck lights. This was the only concession to a pilot's natural aptitude for becoming disoriented across even the briefest interval of night space.
>
> At what I judged to be the best moment, I turned 90 degrees port, dropped wheels and flaps, enriched the fuel mixture, partly opened the cowl flaps, put the prop in low pitch and turned another 90 degrees to arrive downwind dead astern of the carrier. Then I was committed to the approach – all my attention was aimed at visually acquiring the LSO's luminous paddles. I momentarily panicked and said, 'Where the hell are you?'
>
> First I sensed the colored paddles, then I knew I saw them. The LSO's arms were both out straight. Roger! My ragged confidence was restored, although I remained a good deal less than cocky. I checked my airspeed down to the required 90 knots. Before I knew it, I saw the 'cut' signal. Then, 'WHAM!' The tailhook caught a wire and I was stopped on a dime.
>
> I taxied past the barrier, came to rest beside the island and cut the engine. As had been the case after my first live combat mission, my flight suit was reeking of sweat.

By the time the US Marine Corps CVEs became operational the war was winding down. Despite initial intent, the CVEs *Block Island* and *Gilbert Islands,* which arrived off Okinawa in May with US Marine Corps squadrons embarked and a primary mission of CAS, logged more sorties striking targets in Sakishima Gunto than working with infantry ashore. Rear Adm Calvin C. Durgin, commanding the escort carrier force at Okinawa, noted that US Navy CVE squadrons were well trained in CAS support. He added:

> The advent of Marine air groups in CVEs should not be permitted to complicate the support carrier picture any more than is necessary. Marine air groups should be and probably are as flexible as Navy squadrons and groups, and should remain so, and should expect no preferential treatment. To assign all Marine squadrons to direct support work would probably work to the detriment of morale of the Navy groups, and this command sees no reason for such assignments and has no intention of allowing it to occur.

The "jeep carriers" also contributed to the Balikpapan, Borneo, occupation. In July and August *Cape Gloucester* aircrews participated in an operation off the China coast, with VMF-351 downing five aircraft. Two fell to Lt Col Don Yost, who on August 5 became the last US Marine Corps ace of the war, having started his career with VMF-121 at

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Guadalcanal. Meanwhile, *Vella Gulf* arrived off Okinawa as the war ended. *Block Island* and *Gilbert Islands* supported the Allied occupation of Formosa and evacuation of former PoWs.

Ultimately, 14 of the planned 16 MCVGs were established or directed to form. In the rapid postwar demobilization the US Marine Corps CVE program was drastically reduced to provide three Marine carrier air groups for the Pacific Fleet and two for the Atlantic.

Okinawa

Codenamed Operation *Iceberg*, the assault on Okinawa was the largest amphibious landing of the Pacific Theater. After the Philippines, *Iceberg* represented the only full-scale conventional warfare in the Pacific. It turned into a grinding, 83-day slugging match with high casualties on both sides. The assault troops came from the Tenth Army and III Amphibious Corps, the latter commanded by Lt Gen Roy Geiger of Guadalcanal fame.

Allied planners knew that the assault on Okinawa, situated only 400 miles south of Japan, would draw a violent response from the enemy. The Ryukyus represented the closest base to the home islands from which Operation *Downfall* – the long-expected invasion of Japan itself, which was slated for late 1945 or early 1946 – could be launched. With nothing left to lose, Tokyo would throw everything into defending Okinawa. Consequently, land-based air power would be essential to American goals. The Tactical Air Force (TAF) was commanded by a Solomons veteran, Maj Gen Francis P. Mulcahy, double-hatted as CO of the 2nd MAW. The TAF included US Marine Corps and USAAF fighter-bomber groups mainly flying F4Us and P-47s, respectively. Both types were capable of providing both air defense and ground support, as required.

The first two airfields available ashore were in the southern part of Okinawa, MAG-31 and MAG-33 flying in to Yontan and Kadena from escort carriers in early April. They were followed by MAG-22 at nearby Ie Shima in May and, finally, MAG-14 in July. The four groups totaled 12 Corsair squadrons, three Night Hellcat units and two Avenger bombing squadrons. The TAF also included three USAAF P-47 groups, each with three squadrons, and an attached P-61 nightfighter unit, all based at Ie Shima. Six US Marine Corps air warning squadrons also operated in the Ryukyus, with eight stations on Okinawa, Ie Shima and other islands. These units combined with US Army radars and ship-based fighter directors to provide a near-continuous coverage of the Ryukyus, day and night.

Brig Gen William J. Wallace supervised Okinawa's air defense command – an integrated organization with US Marine Corps and USAAF groups, plus MAG-43's radar facilities. Wallace placed the highest priority on defeating kamikazes, and with reason.

On April 7 (the day the first Corsairs arrived on Okinawa) VMF-311 got an early start. Capt Ralph McCormick's division was providing CAP during the launch from USS *Sitkoh Bay* (CVE-86), which was sailing 100 miles from Yontan, when a hostile was spotted. McCormick and his three pilots jumped on the Yokosuka P1Y "Frances" bomber, their F4U-1Cs with 20mm cannon chewing up the IJN aircraft. Its determined pilot kept his burning bomber on course for the ship, however, splashing into the sea just off the port beam.

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Kadena and Yontan airfields were early objectives for the invading troops, lying just a mile inland from the landing beaches on the southwest coast. They were works in progress that first week as aviation engineers toiled tirelessly to expand the facilities and repair damage from enemy air raids. A lone bandit struck on the 11th, cratering the runway, but 1Lt Al Wells caught the offending "Tony" fighter and shot it down for VMF-323's first kill. Many more would follow.

The Japanese launched persistent, heavy kamikaze attacks throughout April, mostly directed against the fast carriers. US Marine Corps fighters claimed a wartime record 77 shootdowns on April 12, but only 17 were claimed by TAF units. The other 60 fell to US Marine Corps squadrons or individual leathernecks embarked in fast carriers.

That month the Japanese launched four large kamikaze operations designated *Kikusui* (Floating Chrysanthemum). Contrary to the norm, the JAAF and IJN cooperated in the *Kikusui*, conducted jointly by the Fifth Air Fleet and Sixth Air Army. The primary kamikaze nests were four bases on Kyushu, Japan's southernmost island, but some suiciders transited nearly 400 miles from Formosa (now Taiwan) to the south. By far the largest Chrysanthemum operation was the first, with 355 aircraft on April 6 and 7, followed by 465 others through the 28th. Their primary targets were Allied ships, especially aircraft carriers, but attacks also continued against Okinawa itself. About 65 percent of the initial wave were IJN aircraft, with the ratio declining somewhat during May and June.

The Japanese were persistent but the weather was eternal. The North Pacific churned out successive storm fronts, often drenching the airfields with rain, occasionally swamping parking and living areas. Pierced steel planking (PSP) attenuated many of the runway problems, but sometimes aircraft became mired in the mud until additional PSP could be laid. Meanwhile, the F4Us flew from dawn to dusk – in the three remaining weeks of April they logged 3,521 CAP sorties while claiming 146 shootdowns during 11 days of combat.

MAG-31 and MAG-33 nightfighters established their presence early on, both arriving on April 7. Capt James Etheridge of VMF(N)-543 scored the first nocturnal kill when he downed a Nakajima Ki-84 "Frank" fighter over Kadena on the 15th. The next night VMF(N)-542 drew blood twice, and by month-end the nocturnal Hellcats had claimed eight victims. The first three were downed in the same time period – shortly before 1900 hrs local time – and subsequently Japanese raiders preferred the early hours of the morning to ply their trade.

F4Us and P-47s flew barrier combat air patrols (BarCAPs) north of Okinawa to intercept raiders inbound from Japan. During April and May US Marine Corps squadrons claimed 378 kills for only three known losses to enemy aircraft among 109 TAF total losses.

Early in the campaign fighter-bombers operated within range of enemy artillery, which meant that some of the sorties flown were similar in length to those conducted on Peleliu. 1Lt Jack Broering of VMF-323 recalled:

> The frontline was only six miles from the field at Kadena so we could see other Corsairs making their runs. We were also close enough to take ground fire but as the campaign progressed we got farther and farther out of their range.

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> Bombing and rocket attacks were quite similar, differing only by the amount of lead you give the target. Our rockets – 3½in. and 5in. rounds – were fine weapons. I liked them as I thought they were the most effective weapons we had. We usually fired them while in a 45-degree dive, making about 400mph. If you went too fast you'd start losing the covering on the elevators. You could put your pipper on the target with rockets, whereas with bombs you had to judge the correct lead. With napalm we'd make a flatter approach, trying to spread it over a large area. We dropped at about 100ft, napalm being contained in our fuel tanks. They weren't too accurate. We used it to effect against tunnels and caves, sometimes managing to put it right into the entrances.

One of the biggest days of the campaign was April 16 in response to *Kikusui* No. 3, when VMF-311 fought one of the classic kamikaze combats. Defending the radar picket destroyer USS *Laffey* (DD-724), first on the scene were four FM-2 Wildcats from USS *Shamrock Bay* (CVE-84), the fighters downing four raiders. The "Wilder" Wildcat was a scrappy feline – it had the best American kill-loss ratio of the war – but numbers counted that day. In the prolonged, churning furball, a VMF-311 division learned that kamikazes did not pose the only threat. Orbiting off Izena Shima (north of Okinawa), Capt Gilman Rood's division was vectored onto bandits 35 miles out. Rood and his wingman, 1Lt Thomas M. Kirby, sighted a "Val" low on the water. The squadron diary recorded what happened next:

> Kirby led the attack and smoked her. Rood's first run caused no damage. He closed again, shot the right wing off and the Val flamed, disintegrated, and splashed. 1Lt Raymond M. Barrett and Norman A. Turley then sighted a Betty and seven Vals heading towards a picket ship. Many other friendly aircraft were present and a general melee ensued. Barrett made a run on a Val, which disintegrated and splashed. As he recovered, a plane from VMF-441 [apparently Lt Marion Ryan] flashed in front of him from below and Barrett's propeller chewed the fighter's tail off. The pilot bailed out and got into his raft. Barrett waited until the downed pilot had been sighted by rescue vessels. Turley spotted a Val making a dive for a picket ship and made a run on her. The Val, under the impact of four 20mm guns on the F4U-1C, promptly blew up and splashed close by the picket ship.

The squadron claimed five kills in the melee, but other Corsairs were badly needed. Answering the call were three divisions of Maj Bob White's VMF-441, which claimed 16 kills. The Japanese offered plenty of opportunity – 2Lt William Eldrige splashed two "Vals", a "Zeke" and a "Betty", while Capt Floyd Kirkpatrick and 2Lt Selva McGinty scored triples. However, it was not one-sided as Maj White's squadron lost four Corsairs that day.

Laffey was as tough as they came, the vessel surviving four bomb hits and six kamikaze strikes. She was towed to safety with 32 dead and 71 wounded.

The Okinawa Marines' toll of 35 kills that day included no claims for probable or damaged – a rarity given the high volume of claims. US Navy squadrons claimed 157 kills – the sixth highest haul of the war – with 14 probables or damaged.

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Six days later, on April 22, it was the turn of Maj George Axtell's VMF-323 "Death Rattlers" to be amongst the victories. His squadron had served a long apprenticeship. Established at Cherry Point in August 1943, it moved to the Pacific in July 1944 and finally arrived at Kadena in early April 1945.

On the 22nd the "Death Rattlers" launched six missions without remarkable results. The seventh time was lucky. George Axtell took two divisions on CAP that afternoon and received a vector onto a gaggle of "Vals" threatening US ships north of Aguni Shima. The ensuing 20 minutes amounted to an Okinawa turkey shoot according to the squadron diary:

> Maj Jefferson D. Dorroh Jr, executive officer, burned five planes and exploded a sixth, all within 20 minutes. Maj George C. Axtell Jr, commanding officer, shot down five planes within 15 minutes. Twenty-one-year-old Lt Jeremiah J. O'Keefe also shot down five planes, one of which tried to ram him after it caught fire.

Dorroh later recalled, "I could see it was going to be a long day so I switched off two guns." He got only one tail shot, the others being deflection shooting, but his aim was deadly. His sextuple was the most kills in a day by a Marine since "Zeke" Swett's Medal of Honor mission at Guadalcanal two years before. None of the three instant aces had ever seen an enemy aircraft before, and Dorroh never got to shoot at another.

Seven "Death Rattlers" were credited with a record 24.75 victories in one mission, while VMF-224 and VMF-441 added eight more. Axtell summarized, "We just tore them wide open. Man, you never saw such a rat race. We made pass after pass on them and we were shooting so much lead I was afraid we'd start shooting each other up."

On April 28 Corsair pilots got another opportunity to increase their scores, mainly at the expense of fixed-gear "Vals" and "Nates". Cycling through the CAP station called Point Uncle at Izena Shima, relays of fighter divisions reported to their controllers and awaited business. In a three-hour period that evening elements of five squadrons splashed 37 bandits, the victories mainly going to VMF-323 and VMF-311. In a rare instance of shore-carrier US Marine Corps cooperation, the fight started with VMF-221 off *Bunker Hill* claiming 14 victories.

The first success of the day had actually occurred at 0015hrs when Capt Wallace Sigler (a former AirSols Corsair pilot) of VMF(N)-542 bagged a "Tony" for his fifth victory of the war.

The Japanese tried again on May 4 with *Kikusui* No. 5, resulting in a record bag of 61 planes for TAF Marines. Numerologists might have made a study of VMF-323, as "Big Ax" Axtell's pilots matched their April 22 toll with another haul of 24.75 victories identified as "Nates", "Jills", "Vals", "Dinahs" and "Helens". Sixteen "Rattlers" participated in the shooting, with 1Lts John Ruhsam and Robert Wade each claiming four destroyed and three damaged. That same day VMF-311 downed 17 planes in two combats, morning and evening, with 2Lt William P. Brown claiming four.

On May 10 Capt Ken Reusser's VMF-312 division intercepted a high-flying Kawasaki Ki-45 "Nick" twin-engined reconnaissance aircraft. The fighter controller, callsign "Handyman", gave the Corsairs a cutoff vector that allowed them to close some of the distance. But the second section of Corsairs lagged behind, so Reusser continued with

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Lt Robert R. Klingman. Reusser had already experienced ample excitement. His plane had been badly hit by AA fire on April 29, forcing him to ditch offshore – he was soon rescued by a destroyer. Now Reusser was determined to pursue a confirmed bandit. To reduce weight and climb higher, both Marines fired most of their ammunition – a Corsair's 2,400 rounds of .50in. shells weighed 600lb. The Japanese rear gunner returned fire, putting some 7.7mm holes in Reusser's plane.

The pursuit continued to an unprecedented height – 38,000ft. Reusser closed in and triggered a burst that connected with the "Nick's" starboard wing and engine. Then he ran dry. Klingman moved in to complete the kill, but in the extreme cold his guns failed. Intentionally or not, his prop collided with the decelerating Japanese aircraft, nearly destroying the rudder. On his next attempt Klingman finished chopping off the rudder and slicing into the stabilizer, but the "Nick" maintained level flight. Bob Klingman was not to be denied. He coordinated stick and throttle to buzz saw off the rest of the stabilizer. The tough Kawasaki dropped from the thin atmosphere in a death spiral. Despite his damaged prop, Klingman landed at Kadena. He was missing six inches of his prop tips, his Corsair had 7.7mm holes in the prop and wings and pieces of aluminum made in Japan protruded from his cowling. Nevertheless, the F4U was repaired and returned to operations.

Two days later Klingman's F4U developed hydraulic problems, forcing him to abandon ship but, like Reusser, he was saved by the US Navy.

The night war heated up in mid May when Maj Marion Magruder's VMF(N)-533 went operational. The squadron set a blistering pace, scoring its first kill on the night of the 16th, followed by five each on the 18th and 24th (the latter covering 22 hours). The previous record had been two in one night. "Black Mac's Killers" dominated the Ryukyu night skies, scoring 15 victories each in May and June (out of a total 49 Hellcat claims in those months) and five of nine in June. Along the way they produced the US Marine Corps' only nightfighter ace, Capt Bob Baird.

The reasons for VMF(N)-533's stellar record defy simple explanation. Magruder was well experienced, having flown an exchange tour with the RAF in 1943. Moreover, the squadron had been in the Pacific for a full year, mainly flying dull patrols in the Marshalls. That period allowed it time to perfect equipment, techniques and procedures that paid handsome dividends in combat. Magruder's troops considered him a demanding but fair skipper who shared their risks and stood up for them. When US Navy gunners killed one of his pilots, Magruder gained permission from Gen Geiger to visit the amphibious force commander. Accompanied by Geiger, Magruder boarded Vice Adm Richmond K. Turner's flagship and, to the extent possible for a major, "Black Mac" chewed out the fearsome amphibious commander.

While F4U and F6F pilots relished the repeated scoring opportunities, the Ryukyu sky could deliver unpleasant surprises. On the night of May 24-25 the Japanese launched repeated bombing missions around Yontan, but added a chilling wrinkle. Four Kawasaki Ki-21 "Sally" bombers were shot down by AA gunners in five minutes, with at least one Mitsubishi evidently attempting a landing. It crashed into an AA site, killing two Marines. The fifth bellied in on Yontan's main runway, disgorging suicide commandos. A new kamikaze tactic – the *Giretsu* – had arrived.

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Japanese soldiers scrambled up and down the flightline, placing explosives on aircraft and facilities. In the darkened, tracer-lit confusion, nine planes were destroyed and nearly 30 damaged. Most spectacularly, 70,000 gallons of high-octane fuel erupted in the supply area. Most of the commandos were killed that night, but the last was only hunted down after noon near MAG-31's headquarters. The only American fatality was a nightfighter officer probably killed by friendly fire – 18 suffered wounds.

Two major actions on May 25 produced another large haul. The "Checkerboards" of VMF-312 intercepted a gaggle of "Zekes" only 60 miles north of Kadena and splashed 13 shortly before 0800hrs. Minutes later VMF-322 and VMF-323 were vectored onto another formation of fighters near the offshore islands, claiming 16 more. Sporadic combats lasted almost until noon when VMF-312 finally completed the work it had started. Top honors went to 2Lt James Webster of VMF-322, with three confirmed and a probable among the day's 42 claims. It remained the second busiest day in TAF history.

Kikusui No. 8 on May 27-28 involved 110 aircraft – the fewest sent on a special attack to date. May's total of 550 aircraft committed to the offensive was significantly down from April's 820, probably reflecting Tokyo's growing concern about adequate defense for the expected invasion in the fall.

June Arrivals

Operating in the Philippines, MAG-14 pilots chafed at missing the unprecedented hunting at Okinawa. Col Edward Montgomery, newly in command, received F4U-4s in mid May, with his squadrons spending two weeks learning to fly and maintain the ultimate wartime Corsair. VMF-212, VMF-222 and VMF-223 arrived at Kadena on June 8. They narrowly missed *Kikusui* No. 9, which committed only 50 aircraft over five days. VMF-212 claimed first blood for the new Corsair with a "Val" destroyed two days later. It ended a long drought, as VMF-212, like the other squadrons, had had no aerial encounters since early the previous year.

Amid continuing operations, some significant command changes occurred in June. On the 11th Maj Gen Louis Woods took over the TAF from the ailing Francis Mulcahy. Then a week later a unique event occurred when US Marine Corps Maj Gen Roy Geiger succeeded US Army Lt Gen Simon Bolivar Buckner at the helm of Tenth Army. Buckner was killed by the Japanese artillery, leaving Geiger as the senior subordinate. Although his tenure at the head of a numbered army lasted only five days, it marked another advance for Marine aviation nevertheless.

Squadron leadership also changed periodically. After a record-setting 23 months in command of VMF-323, George Axtell was relieved by Maj Martin Oelrich in mid June. Reflecting on his tenure, Axtell said:

> It was like a dream. We trained all that time to shoot down planes and then we found so many that we just sprayed them.
>
> Most of our kills were 'flamers' – a big red fireball. The aircraft on fire normally would blow up, usually just as you went past him. We had gun cameras, but unfortunately they weren't the best, and we had a hard time seeing exactly what we

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> had caught on film. Furthermore, intelligence took most of them away from us, so we could only use what little we were left with. I wished at the time that we could get copies, as we could have learned a lot more, and would therefore had been able to further improve our tactics. A pilot would describe what he saw, but their accounts would often differ from what showed on the film. The pilot might for instance say that he was about 100 yards behind an enemy aircraft when the film would demonstrate that he was at least 300 yards away. The film also enabled us to coordinate times and positions, and by comparing them we could also verify victory credits.

A Solomons veteran scored a notable success on the night of June 15 when Maj Bruce Porter, skipper of VMF(N)-542, operated under control of "Handyman". Porter had left the Solomons with three victories in 1943, survived a disastrous night qualification session aboard an escort carrier and transferred to nightfighters. He became "Black Mac" Magruder's exec in VMF(N)-533 and took over VMF(N)-542 in May. That night he was vectored onto two hostiles, downing a "Nick" and a "Betty" west of the island. The bomber seemed to be carrying an *Ohka* rocket-powered bomb – a weapon that caused more concern than damage to Allied shipping.

On the afternoon of June 21 near Kikai Jima, 1Lt Martin Tiernan's VMF-223 division sighted some bogies northbound at 8,000ft. Tiernan was cautious, tentatively recognizing the fighters as P-47s. He descended to investigate. Against the glare, he had closed to within 200 yards of the aircraft before he discerned the *Hinomaru* suns on the wings of 12 Nakajima Ki-44 "Tojos". Tiernan closed on the right-hand section in a 280-knot attack, killing the first target with a perfectly placed burst at 50 yards. Almost immediately a Japanese pilot drew a bead on Tiernan, but his own wingman, Lt Groot, shot it off his tail. Both "Tojos" went down streaming smoke into the ocean. The others evaded into clouds. The Marines believed they could have downed four more had they attacked immediately, but they were properly cautious about friendly fire losses.

The "Tojos" were the squadron's first victories since February 1944. According to VMF-223's diary, in the brief combat "the F4U-4 proved it could out-climb, out-dive and out-fly the Tojo, and since the enemy aircraft did not stay to find out, it is thought that the Tojo pilots shared this opinion."

The tenth and last *Kikusui* was flown on June 21 and 22, and it consisted of a mere 45 aircraft. No fewer than 1,465 of the 1,900 kamikazes sent against the Allies between April and June 1945 had been sortied during the ten *Kikusui* special operations missions. Although catastrophic losses had been inflicted on the attackers, the Allies had also suffered, with 26 ships sunk and 164 damaged, some never to return to service.

The Tenth Army declared Okinawa secure on June 22. That day, nine of the 17 US Marine Corps fighter squadrons committed to Operation *Iceberg* claimed 33 victories, running their total to 490. Combat began and ended in the dark, "Mac" Magruder's night stalkers flaming four hostiles shortly past midnight and "Scrapper One" himself adding another kill 24 hours later. Among the Corsair units, VMF-113 got the most shooting, splashing seven fighters near Amami O Shima in addition to two earlier kills that morning.

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Top-Scoring Okinawa Fighter Squadrons, April 7 to June 22, 1945

Squadron	Group	Victories
VMF-323	MAG-33	124.5
VMF-311	MAG-31	67
VMF-312	MAG-33	60.5
19th FS	318th FG	59
VMF-224	MAG-31	51
VMF-441	MAG-31	47
VMF(N)-533	MAG-22	35
333rd FS	318th FG	33
VMF-322	MAG-33	32
VMF(N)-542	MAG-31	17

US Marine Corps Aces, Okinawa, April 7 to June 22, 1945

Name	Unit	Score
2Lt W. P. Brown Jr*	VMF-311	7
1Lt J. J. O'Keefe	VMF-323	7
1Lt J. W. Ruhsam	VMF-323	7
1Lt R. Wade	VMF-323	7
1Lt J. V. Dillard	VMF-323	6.333
2Lt D. F. Durnford	VMF-323	6.333
1Lt F. A. Terrill	VMF-323	6.083
Maj G. C. Axtell	VMF-323	6
Capt R. Baird	VMF(N)-533	6
Maj J. D. Dorroh	VMF-323	6
Capt H. J. Valentine	VMF-312	6
1Lt W. L. Hood Jr	VMF-323	5.5
Capt F. C. Kirkpatrick	VMF-441	5.5
2Lt S. C. Alley Jr	VMF-323	5
2Lt C. W. Drake	VMF-323	5
1Lt. S. C. McGinty	VMF-441	5
1Lt A. P. Wells	VMF-323	5

* Killed in Action in Korean War

Okinawa Summary

The Americans suffered more than 12,000 deaths at Okinawa – 7,300 from four US Army and two US Marine Corps divisions, plus nearly 5,000 US Navy fatalities. Kamikaze

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aircraft were largely responsible for the 26 Allied ships sunk. Without both carrier- and shore-based fighters, the toll would have been far worse.

Flying the majority of TAF sorties, Corsairs naturally logged the most combat. The 12 F4U squadrons accounted for two-thirds of the aerial victories claimed during Operation *Iceberg*. Okinawa-based US Marine Corps fighters claimed 507 shootdowns through VJ Day, 16 coming after the island was declared secure. The "Death Rattlers" easily topped the league with 124.5 victories, followed by VMF-311 with 67, VMF-312 with 60.5 and the USAAF's 19th FS/318th FG with 59.

After June 22, 1945 the three nightfighter squadrons had a monopoly on intercepts. From June 24 to war's end the Hellcats scored all 17 US Marine Corps victories from Okinawa, although USAAF P-47s and P-51s claimed occasional kills ranging as far afield as Kyushu and Korea.

Okinawa provided the ultimate hunting ground for Marine fighter pilots – by war's end seven of the Corps' top ten scoring days occurred in the Ryukyus. Seventeen aces were crowned in those 83 days, 11 from Axtell's "deadly passel of kids" to quote historian John De Chant. Lauding the Corsair, George Axtell enthused, "It's the best fighter there is. It's rugged. It's a workhorse. You can use it for anything, including dive-bombing, and it's effective. You can shoot anything off or out of that plane and it still goes." Despite the target-rich skies, no individual pilots broke out of the pack as at Guadalcanal or the Rabaul campaign. Four were credited with seven victories each and three more with six plus shares.

TAF Marines lost 139 Corsairs and 16 Hellcats at Okinawa up to June 22, when the island was declared secure. Nine more F4Us fell through to month's end, with 11 others in July (the TAF stood down on July 13). In all, 41 US Marine Corps planes were known lost to non-combat causes – an indication of the often difficult field operating conditions and the troublesome Pacific weather.

More than half of Okinawa CAS sorties were logged by carrier aviators, including Marines. The irony was not lost on a group commander who said, "It seemed strange for planes off the carriers to come in for close air support missions, passing Marine planes flying out for CAP duty, when it was the Marines who were supposed to be close support experts." Nonetheless, CAS would become Marine aviation's *sine qua non* in the postwar era.

After Okinawa

The end of the Okinawa campaign did not mean a period of relaxation. For instance, newly moved to Chimu, VMF-311 had to clear jungle for housing and facilities – a task that occupied much of July. Although alerted for occupation duty in Japan, the squadron stood down and stopped flying most of the last ten days of August. Instead, personnel were reminded that they remained in the US Marine Corps, complete with inspections and even close-order drill. Deferred aircraft maintenance was one of the few events that seemed to make sense to some of Maj Mike Yunck's Marines.

Ultimately, Okinawa boasted ten airfields, plus another with three runways on Ie Shima. All measured 5,000 to 7,000ft in length and 100ft or more in width. They were going to be needed for the expected invasion of Japan. Allied planners crafted a two-phase

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offensive – Operation *Olympic*, with landings on Kyushu, in November, and *Coronet*, on the Honshu plain, in March 1946.

Two USAAF medium bomb groups and two heavy bomb groups arrived shortly after the island was secured in late June. Another inter-service operation occurred on July 1 when Corsairs escorted B-25s to attack targets in mainland Japan.

At 0300hrs on August 8 2Lt William E. Jennings of VMF(N)-542 intercepted and dispatched a "Tony" 110 miles northeast of Point Bolo – the prominent feature on Okinawa's west coast. It was the 2,627th, and last, aerial victory credited to US Marine Corps fighters in World War II.

But operations continued. For instance, VMF-422 flew almost daily sweeps and strikes to Kyushu for nearly three weeks, then abruptly on August 5 "empire" missions were cancelled. The Marines were puzzled, but only briefly. The next day the world learned of the atomic bomb when a B-29 incinerated Hiroshima – an army headquarters and industrial city on the Inland Sea. Speculation ran amok in the Pacific. Members of all services eagerly traded rumor, gossip and "informed speculation" as to how Tokyo might respond. Three days later, when no reply came to the Allies' Potsdam Declaration demanding unconditional surrender, the USAAF delivered another nuclear weapon against Nagasaki. Finally, on August 15, Emperor Hirohito broke precedent by broadcasting to the nation. He over-rode his war cabinet, which was determined to fight for years longer, and accepted the "unbearable" by surrendering.

Millions of Marines, sailors, GIs, Coast Guardsmen and merchant mariners expelled a vast, collective sigh of immense relief. One of them was Jeff DeBlanc of VMF-422, the Solomons ace in a day who had logged his ninth career victory at Okinawa. He wrote:

> It was exciting to fly at low altitudes over Japan and look over the targets I had shot at in high-speed dives. Now, with the advent of peace, a complacent attitude prevailed. I even touched my wheels on an airfield in Japan and bounced back into the air without landing, as a gesture of defiance. Although I would not be in the occupation forces, I could not see fighting the Japanese for four years and not 'landing' on their soil. It was a weird feeling, especially as this was one of the airfields I had strafed only days before. Maybe this was pushing my luck, but at 24 years of age I still had a little daring left.

For the next two weeks men lived in a twilight zone between joyous anticipation and abiding fear. The formal surrender ceremony was set September 2, and fliers and sailors dreaded what might happen to scuttle the peace in the meantime. On August 16 VMF-223 narrowly avoided an embarrassing incident. Patrolling off Japan, the "Bulldogs" noted an apparent "wolf pack" of submarines cruising just below the surface. Upon checking with their controller the Corsair pilots learned of no friendly submarines in the area and prepared to attack. Into their strafing runs, the Marines were astonished when the "subs" began blowing vertical geysers. The pod of whales continued undisturbed, and the F4Us returned to base.

That month low-flying US Navy carrier pilots returned to their ships with remarkable news. On the roof of a barracks at Omori, near Tokyo, was the notation "Pappy Boyington here." Although Naval Intelligence had learned of Boyington's capture in early 1944, the

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information was kept secret to preserve sensitive radio-monitoring sources. Once he was released, the "Black Sheep" and the country celebrated, while *Life* magazine ran a large photo spread. Having returned from his alleged grave, Boyington was summoned to Washington, D.C. to receive his overdue Medal of Honor from President Truman. While there, Boyington conspired with his former intelligence officer, Frank Walton, to insert a "corrected" last mission report with a claim for two more unwitnessed victories. Thus VMF-214, on the West Coast, was cut out of the loop, and the US Marine Corps gladly endorsed the scheme. Boyington's reputed score rose from 26 to 28, including his excessive AVG claims.

The Solomons "Black Sheep" remarked upon how good their old CO looked after 20 months in captivity. In fact, he looked embarrassingly good, as he later said that he gained weight in prison when both captors and captives went hungry. Most Allied prisoners emerged emaciated, on the verge of starvation, but Boyington had prospered, working in a kitchen. To say that other survivors resented his health is a vast understatement.

In mid October Col John C. Munn's MAG-31 became the first Marine air group to land in Japan, beginning occupation duty at Yokosuka. "Toby" Munn represented the sweep of US Marine Corps aviation. Winged in 1931, he was among the first leatherneck carrier aviators, served as an early staffer at "Cactus", led a Marine air group in the New Hebrides and was assistant for aviation planning in Washington, D.C., before taking MAG-31 to Okinawa. With VMF-224, VMF-311 VMF-441 and VMF-542 under its control, the group remained in Japan until June 1946.

The End

On August 31, 1945 US Marine Corps aviation had grown to five wings with 29 groups controlling 132 squadrons. The Corps numbered 10,005 pilots including, 44 Aviation Pilots (enlisted aviators), 5,389 ground officers (334 women) and 100,970 enlisted (7,112 women). The total 116,364 US Marine Corps aviation personnel included student pilots. It was a startling contrast to the 6,500 personnel of less than four years previously. By early September US Marine Corps operational and training squadrons (excluding headquarters and support units) possessed 1,088 fighters. Corsairs remained by far the majority type, with 762 F4Us, FGs and F3As being in service. Grumman accounted for the rest – 283 Hellcats and 43 Tigercats.

Leaders

Most squadrons experienced a high turnover among commanding officers during the war, with VMF-121 and VMF-211 holding the record of 11 each. The "Fighting Corsairs" of VMF-215 came close behind with ten, followed by at least five units with nine COs. However, some skippers demonstrated remarkable longevity – a dozen or so served for a year or more, their number being led by Frederick Rauschenback of VMF-322 with 23 months in command, closely followed by George Axtell of VMF-323 and Leon Williamson in "Trip Trey" at 22 months each. Robert E. Cameron of VMF-314 and Marion Magruder of VMF(N)-533 served 21 months each.

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The longest-serving COs tended to be the youngest. Axtell had earned his Wings of Gold in May 1941 at the age of 20, been made major in May 1943 and stood up the "Death Rattlers" three months later, all by the age of 22. At Okinawa he and his exec Jeff Dorroh were both 24. Fred Rauschenback had established VMF-322 at age 23. He died in 2006, aged 85.

Wartime provided a vivid contrast to prewar normalcy, when the US Marine Corps was full of captains often in their mid to late thirties. Between immense expansion and attrition, age in grade lowered considerably. Paul Putnam took VMF-211 to Wake as a 38-year-old major, while Joe Bauer, among the most senior aviators in combat, was a 33-year-old captain on December 7, but a lieutenant colonel just eight months later. Squadron commanders' ages steadily declined notably during the Guadalcanal campaign. Bob Galer and "Duke" Davis landed on "Cactus" both aged 29, while John L. Smith was 27. Top performers such as Carl and Foss were also in their prime at 27.

Good leaders tended to reproduce in kind. Lt Col John L. Smith commanded MAG-32 at Cherry Point in 1943 when newly minted Maj George Axtell was an instrument instructor. The Guadalcanal ace liked what he saw in the 23-year-old Pennsylvanian and pushed him along. Axtell recalled:

> We flew together and became close friends. At that time Marine aviation was expanding rapidly, and although young and believing myself to be unqualified, Smith gave me command of VMF-323. I took it on and decided that the group I had was going to be the best. We didn't know what the hell we were doing, but we thought we could whip everybody else.

Contrarily, some commanding officers were not up to the task – an unavoidable consequence of such a vast force expansion in so short a time. A well-known ace recalled his squadron's first all-officers meeting on Guadalcanal in 1943 when the CO announced that he would not be flying missions because, as the only regular officer in the unit, he was "too valuable to risk in combat." The future ace said, "As you can imagine, that went over like a lead balloon with us lieutenants."

Despite the inevitable duds, the overall standard of US Marine Corps squadron leadership remained high throughout the war, from Paul Putnam at Wake Island to Bill Millington in the fast carriers to Marion Magruder at Okinawa. Nowhere was leadership more crucial than Guadalcanal, when the peacetime selection and training process showed its worth in COs the caliber of Joe Bauer, John L. Smith, Bob Galer and "Duke" Davis. The latter trio had no previous command experience, but demonstrated their ability when it mattered most.

Postwar

At the end of September 27 fighter squadrons were active west of Hawaii – 15 under the control of 1st and 2nd MAWs on Okinawa, three with MAG-12 in the Philippines, two on Peleliu, one on Guam and six deployed aboard CVEs. Most of those units were deactivated in the coming months as the peacetime force structure necessarily compressed.

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Some Marine officers remained in their US Navy positions well after VJ Day. Lt Col Hamilton Lawrence, the extremely astute CO of MCVG-9 in USS *Saidor* (CVE-117), fetched up on the staff aboard USS *Badoeng Strait* (CVE-116). Recalling his 1945-46 tenure in "Bing Ding," he said:

> Gradually the Marine CVE connection wore thin and the ships and staffs were converted to anti-submarine warfare duties. I remained on the staff for a full two-year tour and, while we learned much about the sink rate of depth charges and the attenuation of sound echoes in the mud of sea bottoms, it probably did little to further our Marine Corps careers!

Actually, Lawrence retired in 1965 a full colonel, with 9,200 flight hours.

However, the Marine CVE concept was proven sound, and well enough established to become an important, lasting facet of postwar amphibious doctrine.

Wartime Marine aviators continued making contributions for 30 years. They included, most famously, John Glenn, who flew in the Central Pacific with VMF-155 and later became the first American to orbit earth. Baseball great Ted Williams was retained as a wartime flight instructor. Recalled during the Korean conflict, he flew combat missions in F9F Panthers with VMF-311. Three World War II aces died in Korea, while others including Glenn prospered there – he claimed three MiG-15 kills as a US Air Force F-86 exchange pilot. Jack Bolt, a World War II "Black Sheep", also gained an exchange slot to become the Corps' only ace in Korea. And despite his Medal of Honor, Bob Galer again served in combat and survived being shot down.

Marion Carl established world speed and altitude records and commanded a brigade in Vietnam. Joe Foss was twice elected governor of South Dakota and established the American Football League. Jeff DeBlanc became a PhD educator, teaching in government and military schools in the US and Europe.

Whatever their subsequent careers or fortunes, one string bound the World War II aviators together – their lifelong pride in being Marines.

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US MARINE CORPS FIGHTER SQUADRONS DEPLOYED DURING WORLD WAR II

This compilation of US Marine Corps fighter squadrons deployed outside the ConUS from 1941 to 1945 represents research from a variety of sources. The primary reference is the US Navy location and allowance of aircraft report, issued monthly or more frequently throughout the war. The editions in the author's file came from the late Richard M. Hill, a former Naval Aviator and devoted researcher. Additional reports are accessible online at the Naval Aviation History website.

Some omissions and errors were noted and corrected where possible. For instance, two sources might show a Marine air group at different bases. When in doubt I have used the location of the headquarters squadron ("HedRon") from the monthly reports as the most immediate. Additional sources are Sherrod's classic history of US Marine Corps aviation in World War II and specific reports from squadrons in the author's possession.

A separate list includes units inside ConUS for December 1941 and September 1945.

Where applicable, similar aircraft types are listed in numerical precedence. For example, "F4U-1/1D, FG-1D" indicates more Vought-built Corsairs than Goodyear.

Non-fighter units are beyond the scope of this study, so bomber, transport and observation squadrons are omitted. Consequently, some Marine Air Groups are omitted as well. However, the torpedo-bomber squadrons assigned to Marine carrier air groups are included for handy reference.

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Squadron Histories

VMF-111 "Devil Dogs"

GENEALOGY
Established in 1925 as VF-2M, redesignated VF-9M in 1927, VF-5M in 1928, VMF-1 and VMF-111 in July 1941
DEPLOYMENTS
Samoa – March 1942 to January 1944 (F4F-3/4)
Makin – March 1944 (F4U-1)
Kwajalein – November 1944 (F4U-1)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
no victories

Based at Quantico, Virginia, in October 1941, Maj Tom Walker's VMF-111 became one of the US Marine Corps' first two Wildcat squadrons. The "Devil Dogs" were engaged in maneuvers in North Carolina on December 7, 1941 but returned to Quantico two days later and began preparing to deploy after only five months flying Wildcats.

Walker soon assumed command of MAG-13, turning over VMF-111 to Capt Daniel Torrey, who took the squadron to San Diego for shipment to Samoa in March 1942. Once established there, VMF-111 settled into a humid, sub-equatorial routine featuring repeated false alarms for friendly aircraft. The threat of invasion was such that MAG-13 squadrons prepared infantry defenses that were never needed. Subsequently, "Triple One" sent detachments of Wildcats to outlying islands. In October VMF-111 was divided to establish VMF-441 under Torrey, which took nine aircraft.

The "Devil Dog" squadron commanders in late 1942 were Majs Don Yost and Leonard "Duke" Davis, well regarded figures in US Marine Corps aviation. Davis had previously commanded VMF-121 on Guadalcanal and Yost finished the war leading a CVE Marine carrier air group. Both men were aces.

In mid December 1942 Yost took 30 pilots to Guadalcanal, reinforcing Davis' previous squadron. Consequently, VMF-111 became essentially a unit number in Samoa. Eventually rebuilt, the squadron moved to Nukufetau, northwest of Funafuti, in November 1943 in order to support the Gilberts operation later that month. Subsequently flying from Roi and Makin, the squadron's Corsairs bombed nearby Japanese bases, proving the F4U as a dive-bomber in the Central Pacific. The squadron remained at Kwajalein for the rest of the war.

Wartime COs

Maj T. J. Walker Jr	July 1, 1941
Capt D. W. Torrey Jr	March 1, 1942
Maj D. K. Yost	October 5, 1942
Maj L. K. Davis	December 18, 1942
Maj J. F. Cole	September 20, 1943
Maj W. E. Classen	April 7, 1944

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Maj W. T. Herring	October 28, 1944
Maj R. D. Kelly	March 2, 1945
Maj T. A. Todd	July 19, 1945

Subsequent record
Deactivated on November 26, 1945 and reactivated in Dallas on June 1, 1948

VMF-112 "Wolfpack"

GENEALOGY
Established in San Diego on March 1, 1942
DEPLOYMENTS
Solomons – November 1942 to August 1943 (F4F-4)
USS *Bennington* (CV-20) – December 1944 to June 1945 (FG/F4U-1D)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
144 victories, 7 aces
TOP SCORERS

Capt A. G. Donahue	9 (+5 with VMF-451)
2Lt J. J. DeBlanc	8 (+1 with VMF-422)
Maj R. B. Fraser	6
1Lt J. G. Percy	6

Formed ten months before Pearl Harbor, VMF-112, led by Maj Paul Fontana, arrived at Noumea, in New Caledonia, in October 1942 and almost immediately began sending detachments to Guadalcanal. The CO was well experienced with more than 1,100 hours total flight time. Fontana took nine pilots to "The Fighter Strip" east of Henderson Field on November 2, receiving 14 more through the 12th. Three of his men were Aviation Pilots (Marine non-commissioned aviators), all technical sergeants.

The squadron's first two victories were claimed by 2Lt Horace G. Cleveland – a floatplane on November 7 and a Zero three days later. Fontana led the squadron's first significant mission on the 10th, claiming one of three "Bettys" credited, while two Zeroes also were claimed. The next day the Japanese were back, and Fontana scored again, while 2Lt Jeff DeBlanc logged two destroyed and a probable among nine total victories. On November 11 Fontana and his men observed the day after the US Marine Corps' anniversary with a low-level shootout over "Ironbottom Sound" north of the island. Fontana took eight planes into a high-speed tail chase, supporting seven VMF-121 pilots trying to cut off 19 "Bettys"In the resulting combat the "Wolfpack" claimed three bombers and two Zeroes destroyed.

Armistice Day produced the best results yet. In two combats near the Russells, Fontana's pilots claimed six Zeroes in a late-morning dogfight and six floatplanes, plus two more Zeroes later that afternoon. The Guadalcanal campaign climaxed three days later with the desperate Japanese attempt to land reinforcements. VMF-112 flew repeatedly during the morning and afternoon, claiming 14 Zeroes or floatplanes. Two were credited to Fontana, making him the first "Wolfpack" ace, while future top shooter Archie Donahue opened his log.

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DeBlanc made ace the hard way on January 31, 1943 when he was credited with five victories defending SBDs during a strike mission. Although he was shot down, he survived to return to the squadron and later flew at Okinawa. After the war DeBlanc received the Medal of Honor. The next day most of the squadron engaged an enemy anti-shipping attack with exceptional escort. Some 30 Zeroes pushed through, enabling five dive-bombers to sink the destroyer USS *DeHaven* (DD-469) near Savo Island. Among the squadron's 15 credited kills were four Zeroes by 1Lt Gil Percy, while Capt Bob Fraser claimed three "Vals".

By the time the Japanese evacuated Guadalcanal in February 1943 the squadron had claimed 61.5 victories. During rest and rehabilitation (R&R) in Australia some VMF-112 aviators invited a young lady on a group date, prompting her to declare the Yanks "a bunch of wolves." The name stuck – the squadron became the "Wolfpack".

Wartime commanding officers included three aces besides Fontana – Greg Boyington for three weeks until he broke an ankle in a wrestling tussle, Bob Fraser and Herman Hansen.

Following conversion to F4Us in May 1943, Fraser's pilots demonstrated their enthusiasm for the Corsair. In the first combat with the new Vought, off Florida Island on May 13, Arch Donahue downed four Zeroes to make ace, and other pilots added two more. A dogfight near the Russells and Shortlands on June 7 produced two remarkable events. The squadron claimed eight kills but Gil Percy bailed out with a malfunctioning parachute. The canopy provided barely enough lift for a survivable water impact from perhaps 2,000ft, and Percy's injuries took him off flight status for a year.

In the same combat Sam Logan was the object of attempted murder when a vengeful Zero pilot shot at his parachute. Disappointed with the results, the Japanese aviator tried to kill the Marine by chopping him to pieces with the Zero's propeller. Logan lost part of a foot before a P-40 pilot intervened.

By the end of the Solomons tour the "Wolfpack" had claimed 27.5 victories in Corsairs against at least 11 losses to all causes.

Hansen took the unit to Miramar in September 1943, entering a new training cycle. In answer to the fast carriers' need for more fighters in late 1944 the "Wolfpack" and VMF-213 boarded USS *Bennington* (CV-20) with CVG-82 in December, flying from "Benny" for six months. VMF-112 drew first blood during its carrier deployment with five kills during the two-day Tokyo strikes on February 16-17, 1945. A return to Kyushu on March 18 yielded nine victories over Kanoya East airfield, but the squadron doubled that figure during a very busy afternoon while capping Amami O Shima, north of Okinawa, on April 12. That month was the worst of the cruise for losses, however, with the squadron losing four pilots and nine Corsairs.

VMF-112 closed its victory log with four JAAF fighters over Kagoshima Bay on May 14. During the cruise Hansen added 4.5 victories to his previous score with VMF-122 to achieve acedom. 2Lt George Murray narrowly missed becoming a carrier-based ace with 4.5 kills. In all the squadron downed 54 planes during the kamikaze crisis, flying in the Iwo Jima, Okinawa and Home Island operations. Total losses while embarked in *Bennington* were nine aviators and 22 aircraft.

VMF-112 returned to the US in July, flying from El Centro until deactivated postwar.

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Wartime COs

Maj W. J. Huffman	March 1, 1942
Maj P. J. Fontana	May 11, 1942
Capt R. B. Fraser	March 1, 1943
Maj G. Boyington	July 26, 1943
Maj H. Hansen	August 12, 1943
1Lt J. G. Leonard	August 26, 1945

Subsequent record

Deactivated at El Centro September 10, 1945 and reactivated in Dallas on July 1, 1946. Presently, VMFA-112 is a Reserve squadron flying F/A-18A+ Hornets from Fort Worth, Texas

VMF-113 "Whistling Devils"

GENEALOGY
Authorized at El Toro on January 1, 1943 and established on September 15, 1943
DEPLOYMENTS
Engebi – February 1944 to April 1945 (F4U-1)
Ie Shima/Okinawa – May to September 1945 (F4U-1D)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
21 victories, no aces
TOP SCORERS

1Lt J. Van Schellack	2.5
Maj L. D. Everton	2
2Lt R. D. Allcroft	2

Led by Solomons veteran Loren D. Everton, the "Whistling Devils" fully exchanged F4Fs for F4Us in August 1943 and sailed from San Diego in September, only two weeks after formal commissioning. Following three months in Hawaii the squadron deployed to Tarawa and Kwajalein, settling on Engebi in February 1944. Maj Charles Kimak's Corsairs flew strike missions against atolls in the Marshalls and western Carolines.

The squadron's first aerial combat occurred on March 26, 1944 during an escort mission over Ponape when its pilots claimed eight "Zekes" that were attempting to intercept B-25s. Top scorer was 1Lt Joe Van Schellack with two solo kills and one shared. Other than three nightfighter claims, the "Devils'" combat on March 26 was the only aerial encounter by US Marine Corps squadrons in the Central Pacific between November 1943 and November 1944.

Fourteen months passed before the squadron next shot at aerial targets. Shortly after arrival at Ie Shima in May 1945, the "Devils" began picking off single intruders, splashing five as of June 9. The last combat came on June 22 with nine victories near Amami O Shima – 2Lt Rodger Allcroft led the scoring with two "Zeke" kills. The Ryukyus deployment cost 18 aircraft and four pilots, although exec Maj Orvin Ramlo survived his Corsair's loss on July 2. His was a long war, flying SB2Us at Midway and F4Fs with VMF-223 at Guadalcanal.

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Delegated to occupation duty, VMF-113, led by Maj Hensley Williams, moved to Omura, on Kyushu, in late September, returning to the US in November.

Wartime COs

Capt J. H. King Jr	January 1, 1943
Capt L. D. Everton	February 7, 1943
Maj C. Kimak	September 8, 1943
Maj P. R. White	December 19, 1944
Maj H. Williams	February 21, 1945

Subsequent record
Deactivated at El Toro on April 30, 1947

VMF-114 "Death Dealers"

GENEALOGY
Established at El Toro on July 11, 1943
DEPLOYMENTS
Green Island/Funafuti – March to May(?) 1944 (F4U-1)
Peleliu – September 1944 to June 1945 (F4U-1)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
no victories

Although never operational in an area where it was opposed by enemy aircraft, VMF-114 was led by three aces. Maj Ed Overend, a "Flying Tiger" alumnus, established the squadron at El Toro but soon departed. Capt Bob "Cowboy" Stout, the popular skipper for almost a year-and-a-half, was a Guadalcanal veteran, and the last wartime CO was Maj Herb "Trigger" Long of varied experience in the Solomons and from fast carriers.

After transition to Corsairs in September 1943, VMF-114 arrived in Hawaii in December, serving on Midway until February 1944. Combat operations began from Green Island in March, the unit mainly flying missions to the Bismarcks. Stout took the squadron ashore at Peleliu in September 1944, a year after assuming command. The "Death Dealers" flew some of the shortest combat missions of the war, sometimes lacking time to raise their wheels after takeoff when bombing Japanese positions on Bloody Nose Ridge near the airfield. The pilots became extremely proficient, as demonstrated on September 30 when the Corsairs delivered 20 half-ton bombs in a 100 square-yard area.

A week later the "Death Dealers" supported Marine infantry landing on the small island of Ngesebus, a quarter-mile north of Peleliu. The four senior generals in the Palaus watched VMF-114 aviators practically scrape their bellies on the beach, delivering devastating close-range strafing. Maj Gen William H. Rupertus, commanding the 1st Marine Division, told Stout, "That was a very gutsy show you put on." It was exactly the kind of CAS that US Marine Corps squadrons were expected to provide leatherneck riflemen. The islet was taken with fewer than 30 American casualties.

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"Cowboy" Stout was killed in action in March 1945 but the unit remained on operations until June. "Trigger" Long was still at the helm at Santa Barbara at the end of the war.

Wartime COs

Maj E. F. Overend	July 1, 1943
Capt R. F. Stout (KIA)	September 18, 1943
Maj R. Tucker	March 4, 1945
Maj M. E. Oelrich	April 13, 1945
WO A. J. Carmody	June 2, 1945
Maj H. H. Long	August 2, 1945

Subsequent record

Redesignated VMF(N)-114 on August 1, 1947, redesignated VMF-114 on January 7, 1953 and redesignated VMF(AW)-114 on May 1, 1957. Deactivated at Atsugi on July 1, 1963

VMF-115 "Joe's Jokers"

GENEALOGY
Established in Santa Barbara on July 1, 1943
DEPLOYMENTS
Espiritu/Emirau – March to December 1944 (F4U-1D)
Leyte/Zamboanga – December 1944 to war's end (F4U/FG-1D)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
5.5 victories, no aces
TOP SCORERS
four pilots with one victory each

"Joe's Jokers" were named for their CO, Maj Joe Foss, who assumed command two weeks after the squadron was formed. He remained at the helm for 14 months, with the squadron logo outlasting him – a cartoon Corsair with Foss' trademark cigar clamped in its engine section.

The "Jokers" arrived at Espiritu Santo, New Hebrides, in March 1944, where the flight echelon remained until mid April. Staging through Bougainville, Foss led his Corsairs to Emirau, in the Bismarck Archipelago, on May 2, thus rejoining the ground component. Routine operations were conducted in the Southwest Pacific until year-end, when the squadron moved to Leyte, working for Gen Douglas MacArthur's forces.

Under Maj John H. King, VMF-115 supported amphibious landings at Ormoc Bay and Mindoro early in the new year. The "Jokers'" heaviest casualties in the Philippines occurred in that period, with 14 Corsairs lost to all causes in December and January. Operations at Cebu followed, with another set of landings on Mindanao during March. Later that month the squadron moved to Zamboanga, from where it specialized in

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providing ground support for US Army troops. However, subsequent troop landings at Bongao Sanga Sanga and Jolo, as well as the Negros operation, also occupied the Corsairs. Combat and operational attrition eased after February, with 19 planes written off to all causes from March to August. Maj John S. Payne led the squadron through most of the last three months of hostilities, bombing and strafing on Mindanao. The "Jokers" were still at Zamboanga at war's end.

VMF-115 received Presidential and Navy Unit Citations for its Philippine service. The squadron served in China until the end of 1946.

Wartime COs

Maj J. S. MacLaughlin	July 1, 1943
Maj J. J. Foss	July 17, 1943
Maj J. H. King Jr	September 21, 1944
Maj J. S. Payne	May 30, 1945
Maj T. M. Coles	August 18, 1945

Subsequent record

Redesignated VMF(AW)-115 on December 21, 1956, redesignated VMFA-115 on January 1, 1964. Presently, unit flies F/A-18A++ Hornets from MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina

VMF-121

GENEALOGY

Established at Quantico on June 24, 1941

DEPLOYMENTS

Guadalcanal – September 1942 to September 1943 (F4F-4 and F4U-1)

Peleliu – September 1944 to September 1945 (F4U-1D)

AERIAL COMBAT RECORD

205.5 victories, 12 aces

TOP SCORERS

Capt J. J. Foss	26
1Lt W. P. Marontate	13
Capt G. K. Loesch	8.5

The top-scoring US Marine Corps fighter squadron of all time was established at Quantico, Virginia, in the summer of 1941. Its first skipper was Maj Sam Jack, described by a subordinate as "a kindly, colorful, highly decorated, 35-year-old veteran of the Banana Wars." The executive officer, John Condon, like Jack was an Annapolis graduate. Originally equipped with Brewster Buffaloes, the squadron fully transitioned to Wildcats in April 1942.

By the time VMF-121 reached the Pacific it was led by another naval academy alumnus, Maj Leonard "Duke" Davis. His XO was destined for glory, as Capt Joe Foss led half the squadron – typically eight F4Fs – on most missions. The forward echelon landed

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at Guadalcanal in late September, although a few pilots had previously been "loaned" to VMF-223 and VMF-224. The remaining personnel had joined VMF-121 by mid October. Davis' roster was the largest of any fighter squadron on Guadalcanal – 30 pilots plus himself and, eventually, four displaced USS *Wasp* (CV-7) aviators.

"Cactus" brought unrelenting combat. Between October 11, when VMF-121 began routine operations, and month-end, Davis' pilots were credited with 60 of some 140 victories claimed by US Marine Corps fighter squadrons. However, 16 F4Fs were written off that month and at least nine pilots were listed as killed or missing. The squadron's worst day was November 11, when enemy dive-bombers went for the transports sustaining "Cactus". Davis' crew claimed seven "Vals" (four were credited to 2Lt T. H. Mann) and three Zeroes but lost three pilots in combat and one in a collision. Davis himself was wounded, leading to his evacuation.

The next day the Japanese sent "Bettys" south from Rabaul, resulting in a set-piece interception. Of the 12 kills credited to VMF-121, Foss and 2Lt A. H. Neff each claimed triples. The pace of operations was unrelenting through November 15, with 12 squadron Wildcats written off that month and four more in December. At year-end the squadron's victory tally was pegged at 121 (a remarkable coincidence given the numerology) when the pilots rotated to Australia on R&R. By then the squadron had had at least nine aviators killed in action and others evacuated either sick or wounded.

Resuming combat in January 1943, VMF-121 was led by Maj Don Yost. It accounted for nearly 40 more enemy planes against six losses.

After converting to Corsairs in mid April, VMF-121 spread its wings ever northward up the Solomons, frequently clashing with the enemy over Kahili and Rendova. Personnel constantly rotated in and out, with six "permanent" and one acting CO during 1943. Skipper Ray Vroome survived being downed on June 7, and from May through August the squadron lost at least 18 Corsairs and eight pilots. Upon returning to ConUS in October, VMF-121 was credited with 204.5 victories – an unassailable lead over other VMF units.

The second Pacific deployment began in August 1944 with severely limited chances for combat. Indeed, the only kill claimed fell to 1Lt George Huntington when he splashed a snooping Nakajima C6N "Myrt" over Ulithi Atoll on April 28, 1945. With Japanese defenses severely reduced in most bypassed areas, Marine attrition was limited. Nevertheless, VMF-121 lost 17 planes and five known pilots in its 11-month tour. The squadron was still on Peleliu at war's end.

Assuming command on August 1, 1945, 1Lt R. M. Loughery was VMF-121's 11th wartime commanding officer – a record matched only by VMF-211.

Wartime COs

Maj S. S. Jack	June 24, 1941
Capt L. K. Davis	March 1, 1942
Maj D. K. Yost	January 1, 1943
Maj R. L. Vroome	March 27, 1943

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Capt R. E. Bruce	May 15, 1943
1Lt H. O. DeFries	August 24, 1943
Capt Q. B. Nelson	October 25, 1943
Maj W. J. Meyer	December 1, 1943
Maj C. H. Welch	May 26, 1945
Maj R. Tucker	June 13, 1945
1Lt R. M. Loughery	August 1, 1945

Subsequent record

Deactivated on September 9, 1945, then recalled to active duty in March 1951. Redesignated VMA-121 on May 15, 1951, redesignated VMA(AW)-121 on February 14, 1969, redesignated VMFA(AW)-121 on December 8, 1989 and redesignated VMFA-121 on November 20, 2012. Currently flies F-35B Lightning IIs at MCAS Yuma, Arizona

VMF-122 "Candystripers"/"Werewolves"

GENEALOGY
Established at Camp Kearney on March 1, 1942
DEPLOYMENTS
Espiritu/Solomons – April to November 1943 (F4F-4 and F4U-1)
Peleliu – October 19, 1944 to war's end (F4U-1)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
48.5 victories, 1 ace
TOP SCORERS

Capt E. A. Powell	5
Capt J. H. Reinburg	4 (+3 with VMF-121)
Capt W. M. Lundin	3.5 (+1 with VMF-121)

Originally dubbed the "Candystripers", VMF-122 changed to the more warlike "Werewolves" before departing for combat. The ground echelon arrived at Guadalcanal in mid January 1943, and provided valuable service before the air echelon caught up from Espiritu Santo. Maj Elmer Brackett's Wildcats claimed their first five victories in November and December, with Greg Boyington briefly relieving him in April 1943. Converting to F4Us in mid June, the squadron claimed more than 40 kills that summer under Majs "Hap" Hansen and Bruce Fraser. The best days came over Rendova with ten victories on July 7 and 15 on the 15th – both interceptions of escorted "Bettys".

VMF-122 moved to Miramar in August 1943 and recycled at El Centro under the colorful Maj Hunter Reinburg. In July 1944 the flight echelon was transported to Espiritu Santo aboard USS *Hollandia* (CVE-97). The air and ground echelons merged on Peleliu on October 1, flying local strikes in the Palaus and supporting the US Army landing at Pulo Anna in November. Aside from possibly sinking a small Japanese ship, Reinburg achieved fame for flight-testing an ice cream maker adapted from a drop tank, providing limited quantities to all hands. The squadron continued flying from Peleliu until the end of hostilities, with ace Don Sapp in command.

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In January 1946 the "Candystripers" moved to MCAS Oak Grove, North Carolina, where they stood down. However, VMF-122 was reactivated in November 1947, entering the jet age.

Wartime COs

Capt E. E. Brackett Jr	March 1, 1942
Maj G. Boyington	April 20, 1943
Maj H. Hansen Jr	June 8, 1943
Maj R. B. Fraser	July 8, 1943
Maj J. H. Reinburg	August 22, 1943
Maj F. E. Pierce Jr	February 1, 1945
Maj Q. B. Nelson	March 15, 1945
Maj J. R. Bohne	April 19, 1945
Maj D. H. Sapp	May 28, 1945

Subsequent record

VMF-122 became the US Marine Corps' first jet squadron with the arrival of McDonnell FH-1s in 1947, the unit being led by Lt Col Marion E. Carl. Redesignated VMF(AW)-122 on October 10, 1962, it became VMFA-122 on July 1, 1965. The squadron currently flies F/A-18C Hornets from MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina

VMF-123 "Eight Balls"

GENEALOGY
Established in San Diego on September 7, 1942
DEPLOYMENTS
Solomons – February to September 1943 (F4F-4 and F4U-1)
USS *Bennington* (CV-20) – December 1944 to June 1945 (F4U/FG-1D)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
58 victories, no aces
TOP SCORERS

1Lt W. T. Mayberry	4
Capt J. C. Scott	3
1Lt H. D. Shields	3

The "Eight Balls" left for the Solomons in January 1943 and began operations at Guadalcanal the following month. In July Bob Baker's outfit became the last Solomons F4F squadron to convert to Corsairs, after which it moved to Munda. VMF-123 soon put the F4Us to good use, with frequent combats in August. The squadron logged its biggest day on August 24 in a noontime combat over Kolombangara, pilots claiming nine confirmed and seven probable victories. Among the five successful aviators was 1Lt Walt Mayberry with three. During the month the "Eight Balls" lost eight Corsairs, with three pilots killed or missing. In September half the unit was detached to the Russell Islands, flying mostly uneventful patrols.

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By the time VMF-123 returned to ConUS in December 1943 the squadron had been credited with 29 victories, all achieved during August. The top scorer was Walt Mayberry with four kills.

After turnaround training at Santa Barbara and Mojave, the "Eight Balls" boarded the *Essex*-class carrier *Bennington* on December 31, 1944, flying with CVG-82. Between February and May 1945 the squadron claimed 29 victories, with seven pilots being credited with two apiece, including Majs Everett Alward and Don Frame. The two-day Tokyo strike of February 16-17 netted claims of three confirmed. The deployment's biggest combat occurred during a Kure strike on March 19, with claims for ten destroyed in exchange for two pilots killed and six Corsairs lost. Capt William A. Cantrell scored two kills and two damaged and, although wounded, he shepherded his division homeward. He received a Navy Cross for the action.

Bennington supported the Iwo Jima operation and all of the Okinawa campaign, affording the Marines repeated opportunities for combat. The squadron's best record was seven kills near Amami O Shima on April 12. The last kill was claimed on May 14 near Nobedka, Kyushu, this being the second victory for 1Lt H. F. Pfremmer. It brought the cruise total to 29, matching the Solomons tally of 1943. The "Eight Balls" returned to the US in July 1945, being based at El Centro.

Wartime COs

Maj E.W. Johnston	September 22, 1942
Maj R. M. Baker	April 21, 1943
Maj E. V. Alward	September 12, 1944
Maj T. E. Mobley	February 25, 1945

Subsequent record

Deactivated at El Centro on September 10, 1945

VMF-124 "Death's Head"/"Wild Aces"

GENEALOGY

Established at Camp Kearney on September 7, 1942

DEPLOYMENTS

Solomons – February to September 1943 (F4U-1)

USS *Essex* (CV-9) – December 1944 to March 1945 (F4U/FG-1D)

AERIAL COMBAT RECORD

84 victories, 3 aces

TOP SCORERS

1Lt K. A. Walsh	20 (+1 with VMF-222)
Capt W. E. Crowe	7
Capt H. J. Finn	5

As the US Marine Corps' first Corsair squadron, VMF-124 was established under Maj Bill Gise, who oversaw the often troublesome transition from F4Fs to the more complex F4U.

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After just four months VMF-124 was declared operational in late December 1942, although most pilots had only logged about 25 hours in the speedy Vought by then. Departing San Diego in January 1943, the squadron landed at Guadalcanal on February 12 – just three days after the island was declared secure. Capt J. F. Quigley scored the F4U's first victory in "The St. Valentine's Day Massacre" of February 14 during a hard-fought bomber escort.

The first two weeks ashore proved a learning period as the squadron lost four planes and pilots, with four more Corsairs written off in March. Bill Gise was one of three losses on May 13, his place being taken by Capt Cecil Brewer. That same day former enlisted pilot Ken Walsh became the first Corsair ace, and he continued to score steadily. Capt William E. Crowe and 1Lt Howard J. Finn also made ace as VMF-124 later flew from the Russells, New Georgia and Vella Lavella. In combats around Kahili and Vella Lavella on August 30 the F4Us claimed eight kills against three losses. Ken Walsh got two, then ditched his second Corsair of the war.

The final combats came in early September, with one noteworthy event on the 2nd. During an escort to Kahili USAAF Maj Paul Bechtel, an AirSols staffer, flew a Corsair with VMF-124. The P-38 pilot already had four victories to his name, and the "Zeke" he shot off Maj Don Yost's tail that day probably made Bechtel the only USAAF pilot to claim a kill in a US Navy or US Marine Corps fighter.

At the end of the tour in August VMF-124 had lost some 20 Corsairs to all causes against 69 credited victories.

Upon returning home in October the squadron began rebuilding. Meanwhile, Walsh received the Medal of Honor in February 1944 and began operational instructor duties. After a year training under Lt Col Bill Millington, VMF-124 became one of the first two US Marine Corps squadrons sent to the Fast Carrier Task Force, partnered with VMF-213 in USS *Essex* (CV-9) in December 1944. It had 23 pilots, three non-flying officers and 60 enlisted men, mostly sailors. The squadron received a rough introduction to carrier aviation, losing three planes on December 31, mainly due to weather.

Millington claimed the Marines' first carrier-based aerial victory with a P1Y "Frances" over Formosa on January 3. During strikes against Japanese facilities in Indochina nine days later Capt Ed Hartsock's division was vectored onto a four-engined aircraft. It was brown with no visible markings, and it fired on the Corsairs. The Marines shot the bogey down, which proved to be a Fourteenth Air Force B-24 Liberator. The reason for its aggressive action and failure to communicate were unknown.

1Lt W. E. Reynolds got three of five JAAF bombers over the Philippines on January 20 – the squadron's top score for the cruise. Subsequent operations involving Iwo Jima, Okinawa and the Japanese home islands brought VMF-124's wartime total to 84. At least 12 squadron Corsairs were lost to all causes.

After returning home in April 1945, VMF-124 was based at Mojave until war's end.

Wartime COs

Maj W. E. Gise (KIA)	September 24, 1942
Capt C. B. Brewer	May 13, 1943
Maj W. H. Pace	June 26, 1943

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Maj W. A. Millington	July 14, 1943
Maj J. M. Johnson	March 24, 1945

Subsequent record
Deactivated January 1946

VMF-155

GENEALOGY
Established as VMO-155 in Samoa on October 1, 1942 and redesignated VMF-155 on January 31, 1945
DEPLOYMENTS
USS *Nassau* (CVE-16) – April 1943 (F4F-3)
Marshalls – November 1944 to September 1945 (F4U-1)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
no victories

After brief service in Samoa most of the squadron was sent to the US in December 1942 while some personnel were deployed to Guadalcanal. Upon reforming at Camp Kearney, north of San Diego, VMO-155 became the first US Marine Corps squadron to draw carrier duty in World War II. Flying F4F-3Ps from the escort carrier *Nassau*, the Wildcats supported US Army landings on Attu, in the Aleutians, in April-May 1943, being based at El Centro from June onward.

In February 1944 Maj J. P. Haines took his now Corsair-equipped unit to Midway, thence to the Marshalls that summer. The air and ground echelons were reunited at Kwajalein Atoll in November. Maj J. E. Reynolds relieved Haines in January 1945 and the squadron was soon redesignated VMF-155, flying strikes against isolated Japanese islands in the Marshalls until war's end. Under Maj John Mass, the squadron was based at Kwajalein on VJ Day.

Wartime COs

Capt J. P. Haines Jr	October 1, 1942
Maj J. E. Reynolds	January 14, 1945
Maj W. M. Cargill	February 14, 1945
Maj J. B. Mass Jr	June 30, 1945

Subsequent record
Deactivated on October 15, 1945

VMF-211 "Wake Avengers"

GENEALOGY
Established as VMF-8M in 1935, redesignated VMF-2 in 1937 and redesignated VMF-211 at Ewa on July 1, 1941

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DEPLOYMENTS
Wake Island – December 1941 (F4F-3)
Palmyra Atoll – May 1942 (F2A-3)
Solomons/Emirau – October 1943 to November 1944 (F4U-1D)
Leyte/Zamboanga – December 1944 to VJ Day (F4U-1D)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
91.5 victories, 3 aces
TOP SCORERS

1Lt F. C. Thomas	9
1Lt J. C. Hundley	6
Maj J. W. Ireland	5.333

From Hawaii, Maj Paul Putnam's squadron was ferried to Wake Island by USS *Enterprise* (CV-6) in late November 1941. The advance portion of the squadron gained national acclaim for its defense of the island into late December. VMF-211 achieved a rare success by sinking a Japanese destroyer, and it also claimed nine enemy planes shot down before the last Wildcat was destroyed. After the island was seized on December 23 the surviving squadron members spent the rest of the war in captivity. Capt Henry T. Elrod received a posthumous Medal of Honor after the war.

Upon being reinforced with additional personnel and aircraft, the "Wake Avengers" moved to Palmyra Atoll, temporarily flying Buffaloes before being re-equipped with F4Fs. After receiving Corsairs in July 1943 the "Avengers" entered combat in the Solomons in October, advancing to Bougainville and flying from the newly completed Torokina and Piva strips. Under Majs Bob Harvey and Tom Murto, VMF-211 claimed 71 kills over and around Rabaul in January 1944. The top three scorers – Franklin Thomas, J. C. Hundley and Julius Ireland – claimed most of their victories during this period.

By far the "Avengers"' best day was January 23, 1944, with 16 kills being credited in two missions – sprawling combats over Blanche Channel in the morning and Duke of York Bay late that afternoon. In the latter fight Julius Ireland and Tom Murto each scored doubles. However, January was a costly month with at least ten planes lost and five pilots killed. Amongst the latter were senior aviators Maj William T. Campbell, posted missing over Buka on the 8th, and Maj Robert L. Hopkins, who collided with a VF-17 Corsair while trying to land in darkness at Piva Uncle on the 30th.

Subsequently, the squadron staged through Green Island and Emirau, arriving in the Philippines in December 1944. Flying leathernecks had little opportunity for aerial combat in the area, although VMF-211 notched its last ten victories in December and January. The Corsairs supported a succession of US Army landings in the region, being based at Zamboanga, Mindanao, at war's end. After duty in China the squadron returned home in 1949.

VMF-211 received two Presidential Unit Citations, for Wake Island and the Philippines, plus a Navy Unit Citation for Philippine operations.

Wartime COs

Maj P. A. Putnam	November 17, 1941

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Maj L. S. Moore	December 24, 1941
Maj R. C. West	August 8, 1942
Maj C. N. Endweiss	October 25, 1942
Maj H. J. Mitchner	April 7, 1943
Maj R. A. Harvey	July 16, 1943
Maj T. V. Murto Jr	January 27, 1944
Maj T. P. Wojcik	May 6, 1944
Maj S. J. Witomski	October 20, 1944
Maj P. B. May	January 31, 1945
Maj A. F. Davis	March 21, 1945

Subsequent record

Redesignated VMA-211 on June 30, 1952. The unit currently flies AV-8B Harrier IIs from MCAS Yuma, Arizona

VMF-212 "Hell Hounds"

GENEALOGY

Established at Ewa on March 1, 1942

DEPLOYMENTS

Guadalcanal – September to November 1942 (F4F-4)
Solomons – August to December 1944 (F4U-1)
Philippines – January to May 1945 (F4U/FG-1A)
Okinawa – June to September 1945 (F4U-4)

AERIAL COMBAT RECORD

126.5 victories, 8 aces

TOP SCORERS

1Lt P. C. DeLong	11.166 (+2 with VMF-312 in the Korean War)
Lt Col H. W. Bauer	11
2Lt J. R. Conger	10
Maj L. D. Everton	7 (+3 on secondment to VMF-223 and +2 with VMF-113)

Maj Harold W. Bauer stamped his personality on his squadron as few officers ever did. Widely admired and respected in Marine aviation before Pearl Harbor, "The Coach" stood up VMF-212 in Hawaii and remained in command for nine months. At the end of March the squadron began working its way to Guadalcanal via Efate, the New Hebrides and New Caledonia. Seven pilots were forwarded to VMF-223 at "Cactus" in August, with the rest of VMF-212 arriving in September and October. Officially VMF-212 alit at "Cactus" on 16 October, now Lt Col Bauer leading 19 pilots. The CO arrived over the airfield with little fuel in his tanks, but this did not stop him from shooting down four enemy dive-bombers before he landed!

Two days later seven pilots claimed 13 victories during an early afternoon interception. Marine Gunner Henry Hamilton accounted for three planes, while four more pilots

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gained doubles. At that point Bauer regained most of the "loaners" who had been attached to VMF-223. Amongst their number was Marine Gunner H. B. Hamilton, who was killed in action on the 21st. He had been one of John L. Smith's stalwarts, gaining four victories in August and three more on October 18 following his return to VMF-212.

On October 25, during a major Japanese raid, the squadron notched five kills, two by Jack Conger who ran out of ammunition but not ambition. He closed on a Zero, sawed into its fuselage with his propeller and both planes went in the water. Conger was rescued, having downed an entire three-plane *shotai*. He was picked up by a US Navy boat that also plucked up a Zero pilot. That same day 1Lt J. H. King was shot down and spent four days walking back.

At the end of October Bauer's men plucked the feathers of a group of floatplanes, downing five. It raised the squadron's tally to more than 50 kills, excluding the successes individual pilots had had with other squadrons. The last "Cactus" combat came during the mid-November flurry of missions. Countering the major Japanese reinforcement effort, Bauer and company downed four Zeroes, the last by "The Coach" himself. He disappeared in an attack on Japanese ships on the 14th and was never seen again. From October through November VMF-212 wrote off five Wildcats, with three pilots recovered.

Returning to ConUS by year-end, the squadron had claimed 57 victories, led by 2Lt Jack Conger with eight while Bauer, Loren Everton, Bob Stout and Fritz Payne also achieved acedom.

VMF-212 converted to F4Us in May 1943 just before sailing for Midway. Back in the Solomons that August under Hugh Elwood, the unit moved up to Bougainville in October. The "Hell Hounds" spent 1944 at various Solomons bases, flying against Rabaul, outlying Bismarcks bases and supporting US forces on Bougainville. On the best day of its career VMF-212 scored 20 kills around Rabaul on January 23, four of them falling to 1Lt Phil DeLong (three of these were shared), although Maj D. W. Boyle was posted missing in action. That month the squadron recorded five pilots killed or missing and six Corsairs lost.

In three combats during January and February, Capt William A. Carlton set a record by becoming the oldest leatherneck ace at the age of 37. He was nearly two years older than Joe Bauer had been at Guadalcanal.

Maj Quint Johns took VMF-212 to the Philippines to fly with MAG-14 in January 1945. It was a rough preparation period, with four aircraft written off. Two pilots went missing during early operations from Samar, and over the next four months the "Hell Hounds" lost 17 Corsairs, but 15 pilots were saved.

In June VMF-212 moved to Okinawa, combating kamikazes. However, opportunities were surprisingly rare, with only two victories claimed – a "Val" and a "Zeke" that month near Kadena. Those June combats ran the wartime total to 126 victories – 69.5 in Corsairs. The "Hell Hounds" finished their long war at Awase, on Okinawa, in August.

The squadron was recognized for its Guadalcanal and Okinawa record with two Presidential Unit Citations.

Wartime COs

Maj H. W. Bauer	March 1, 1942
Maj F. R. Payne Jr	November 14, 1942

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Capt R. F. Stout	February 6, 1943
Maj R. D. Hughes	April 2, 1943
Maj S. B. O'Neill Jr	June 1, 1943
Maj H. M. Elwood	January 1, 1944
Maj B. C. McElhany Jr	May, 9 1944
Maj Q. R. Johns	November 18, 1944
Maj J. P. McMahon	April 27, 1945

Subsequent record

Redesignated VMA-212 on June 10, 1952, the unit became VMF-212 on July 1, 1963, VMF(AW)-212 on March 1, 1968 and VMFA-212 on August 10, 1968. The unit was placed in cadre status in 2008 in order to facilitate the US Marine Corps' transition to the F-35 Lightning II

VMF-213 "Hell Hawks"

GENEALOGY
Established at Ewa on July 1, 1942
DEPLOYMENTS
Solomons – March to December 1943 (F4U-1)
USS *Essex* (CV-9) – December 1944 to March 1945 (FG-1D)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
113 victories, 7 aces
TOP SCORERS

Capt W. J. Thomas	18.5
1Lt E. O. Shaw	14.5
Capt J. N. Cupp	12

Maj Wade Britt took VMF-213 to Espiritu Santo in March 1943, where the squadron transitioned from F4Fs to F4Us. Off New Caledonia 39 Corsairs catapulted from the escort carrier USS *Copahee* (CVE-12), landing at Tontouta for staging to Espiritu Santo and on to the Solomons. Flying from Guadalcanal's "Fighter One", the "Hell Hawks" lost their skipper on April 13 when Britt was killed in a predawn takeoff accident, and another pilot disappeared after losing formation. Four Hellhawks fought a lopsided battle with perhaps 36 Japanese fighters and bombers on April 25, claiming five kills while losing a pilot and two F4Us.

On June 17 VMF-213 relieved VMF-124 in the Russell Islands to cover the New Georgia landings. The first large combat occurred on June 30, with 20 kills claimed in two engagements, including four by 1Lt W. J. "Gus" Thomas. The new CO, Maj Greg Weissenberger, had an extremely busy few moments during one of these clashes, gunning down three Zeroes before being hit and bailing out. While being pulled from the water he saw a "Betty" on an intercept course for the destroyer that was rescuing him until an unknown Corsair pilot downed the bomber. That same day 1Lt John

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Morgan's division jumped nine float biplanes, claiming all splashed. 1Lt Ed Shaw was credited with three.

Operating from Guadalcanal and Munda, the squadron continued its winning ways with 16 claims on July 15 and fourteen more on the 17th. The persistent strain of operations that summer soon began to have an effect on VMF-213's pilots, however, and on July 19 Maj Weissenberger cited his flight surgeon's evaluation to Solomons Fighter Command. The report resulted in most pilots being temporarily relieved of flying duties on the basis of combat fatigue.

September was the hardest month yet, with 12 Corsairs lost and seven aviators killed or missing. However, the "Hell Hawks" confirmed 25 victories, with 1Lt "Gus" Thomas emerging as the "topgun" after he claimed two triples during the month. 1Lt Walt Stewart also bagged three in one mission and Jim Cupp claimed four "Vals" on the 18th.

From March to October VMF-213 lost 40 or more aircraft, but listed seven aces on its roster. Upon rotation home in December the squadron tally had reached 105, with Thomas, Ed Shaw and Jim Cupp all double aces or better. A rebuilding cycle began at Mojave early in 1944, with Don Frame becoming the longest-serving CO, commanding for 12 months beginning in February. However, the second ranking ace, Ed Shaw, perished in a flying accident in July.

The "Hell Hawks" again deployed to the Pacific late that year, flying from Ewa to Ulithi Atoll in December. There, VMF-213 joined VMF-124 in CVG-4 aboard *Essex* for Western Pacific operations. The fast carriers provided air power for the Lingayan landings in January 1945, then struck Iwo Jima, Formosa, Indochina, Tokyo and Okinawa. By the end of the *Essex* cruise in March the squadron had claimed another eight victories for a total of 113.

Under Maj Conrad Winter, VMF-213 was based at Mojave when the war ended in August 1945.

Wartime COs

Capt H. T. Merrill	July 1, 1942
Maj W. H. Britt Jr (KIA)	October 1, 1942
Maj G. J. Weissenberger	April 13, 1943
Maj J. R. Anderson	August 22, 1943
1Lt E. O. Shaw	December 11, 1943
Maj D. P. Frame	February 1, 1944
Maj D. E. Marshall	February 5, 1945
Maj C. G. Winter	July 10, 1945

Subsequent record
Deactivated at Ewa on April 24, 1946

VMF-214 "Swashbucklers" and "Black Sheep"

GENEALOGY
Established at Ewa on July 1, 1942

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DEPLOYMENTS
Guadalcanal – March to May 1943 (F4F-4)
Solomons – July 1943 to January 1944 (F4U-1)
USS *Franklin* (CV-13) – February-March 1945 (F4U-1D)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
126 victories, 10 aces
TOP SCORERS

Maj G Boyington	22 (+2 AVG)
1Lt C. L. Magee	9
1Lt W. N. Case	7 (+1 with VMF-112)
1Lt R. W. McClurg	7

One of the best-known American aviation units of all time, the "Black Sheep" are probably only exceeded in their fame by the Tuskegee airmen of the Fifteenth Air Force. The acclaim accorded VMF-214 is due to Greg Boyington, who only commanded the unit for five months.

Capt George Britt, an aeronautical engineer from Georgia Tech, stood up VMF-214 at MCAS Ewa, Hawaii, in July 1942 and took his unit to Espiritu Santo in February 1943. The pilot experience level varied considerably – from veteran enlisted aviators to fresh-minted lieutenants. The squadron flew F4Fs at Guadalcanal from March to May, scoring all ten of its Wildcat victories around Cape Esperance on April 7, and losing three planes that same month.

After the unit had transitioned to F4Us at Efate, Maj Hank Ellis took VMF-214 back on operations in July, flying from the Russells. In July and August the "Swashbucklers" claimed a further 20 kills, the scoring being led by 1Lt Hartwell Scarborough with four and 2Lt Alvin Jensen with three – both made ace following previous F4F scores. A short-term pilot, 2Lt Robert M. Hanson, notched two before moving to VMF-215. Seven Corsairs were lost in that period, including one flown by skipper Bill Pace in an accident – he was killed.

Subsequently, the remnants of the unit moved to Munda to absorb new personnel. Greg Boyington, previously CO of VMF-112, was given command of the yet-unnamed VMF-214 in early September. At that time the squadron number was idle, serving as a replacement pool that included several pilots who had not completed the obligatory three forward-area tours. Boyington selected 28 aviators, including nine with combat experience – perhaps a unique record. Others had received excellent training in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) or had been "plowback" instructors in Naval Air Training Command. That depth of experience paid off handsomely. Because of their uncertain status the fliers dubbed themselves "Boyington's Bastards", but settled on "Black Sheep" as a more presentable variant.

On their first major mission, on September 16, 1943, the "Black Sheep" claimed 11 kills, five of them by Boyington himself. He led several missions northward through October before a rest period at Espiritu Santo. Back in action from Vella Lavella in late November, the squadron experienced some hard-fought combats, losing three pilots each on December 23 (including the exec, Maj Pierre Carnagy) and 28. "Pappy" continued leading sweeps and escorts in December, steadily claiming victories. However, he

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disappeared with his wingman near Rabaul on January 3, 1944, and the squadron completed its tour five days later. At that time seven other "Black Sheep" were aces, led by 1Lt Chris Magee with nine – he was a cousin of John Gillespie Magee, the RCAF pilot who wrote the lyric poem *High Flight*. Conversely, Boyington's squadron had lost 25 aircraft and more than a dozen aviators.

Maj Stan Bailey was the only Solomons veteran still in VMF-214 when it reorganized at Santa Barbara in late January 1945. Trained for carrier operations, the "Black Sheep" embarked in *Franklin*, beginning operations off Japan on March 18. The next day "Big Ben" was caught by surprise in a bombing attack that nearly destroyed the ship and inflicted heavy loss of life. Some pilots were extremely fortunate to survive. One was 2Lt Carroll Faught, who was badly injured in an explosion. Not fully equipped for an upcoming launch, a squadronmate helped "Buddy" Faught inflate his G-suit as an improvised life preserver. Topside, they were blown overboard, and Faught survived minus one leg. Six "Black Sheep" officers and 26 enlisted Marines were killed amid the carnage.

Returned Stateside in April 1945, the squadron reformed at El Centro. Twenty-four-year-old Maj George Hollowell, one of Bob Galer's VMF-224 Guadalcanal veterans, assumed command on August 1, 1945, remaining at El Centro until war's end.

In 1953 one of Boyington's aces, Maj Jack Bolt, became the only Marine jet ace when he shot down six MiG-15s as a USAF exchange pilot near the end of the Korean War. Bolt remains one of just seven Americans to "make ace" in two separate wars. The colorful Chris Magee flew briefly for the Israelis, then took to bank robbery and served time in federal prison.

Wartime COs

Capt G. F. Britt	July 21, 1942
Maj H. A. Ellis Jr	June 9, 1943
Maj W. H. Pace (KIA)	July 12, 1943
Capt J. R. Burnett	August 7, 1943
Maj G. Boyington (MIA)	September 7, 1943
Maj W. H. McPherson	March 2, 1944
Maj S. R. Bailey	April 11, 1944
Maj G. L. Hollowell	August 1, 1945

Subsequent record

Redesignated VMA-214 on July 9, 1957, the unit currently flies AV-8B Harrier IIs from MCAS Yuma, Arizona

VMF-215 "Fighting Corsairs"

GENEALOGY

Organized as VMSB-244 at Santa Barbara on June 3, 1942, redesignated VMSB-242 on September 14, 1942 and redesignated VMF-215 on September 15, 1942

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DEPLOYMENTS
Midway – April 1943 (F4U-1)
Espiritu/Munda – July 1943 (F4U-1)
Torokina/Bougainville – January 1944 (F4U-1)
Emirau – September 1944 (F4U-1)
Ewa – 1945 (F4U-1)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
135.5 victories, 10 aces
TOP SCORERS

1Lt R. M. Hanson	23 (+2 with VMF-214)
Capt D. A. Aldrich	20
Capt H. L. Spears	15

Capt Jim Neefus, a well-regarded officer who had previously led VMF-221, held command of VMF-215 for its first 14 months. Ironically, for so successful a fighter squadron, VMF-215 first bore two dive-bomber unit designations during 1942.

VMF-215 arrived at Midway in April 1943, then proceeded to Espiritu Santo and points north. The squadron's first combat occurred on August 1 with two Zeroes damaged in a scrap north of Munda. Capt Don Aldrich scored the first confirmed kill on the 12th, signaling the start of near constant combat for VMF-215. Mostly flying from Munda, the "Fighting Corsairs" were credited with 22 victories by month-end. The last of those went to 1Lt Grafton Sidger on the 30th, identified as a "Fred," the Japanese Focke-Wulf Fw 190!

Over Ballale on September 2, Aldrich became the squadron's first ace, while another luminary, Capt Harold Spears, scored a double.

Lt Col H. H. Williamson commanded the "Fighting Corsairs" during October and November, supervising the move to Vella Lavella. The final combat of the year came on November 1 with five kills over Empress Augusta Bay, three by a new arrival. 1Lt Bob Hanson had completed a forward tour with VMF-214, during which time he had scored two kills. Now with VMF-215, he downed two "Zekes" and a "Kate" on the 1st over Empress Augusta Bay at Bougainville. Although he too was shot down on that mission, at least Hanson was now ranked as an ace.

Maj Bob Owens took over in December, and although he only remained as CO through February 1944, those three months were by far the squadron's most active.

VMF-215's third tour was spent at Torokina, Bougainville, beginning in late January. The "Fighting Corsairs'" best day was January 14 with 19 victories in a sprawling combat over Rabaul. Hanson returned with claims for five kills, Maj Arthur Warner with four and Owens and Capt Ralph Robinson scored doubles. Capt Roger Conant made ace in the same mission. The "Corsairs" did nearly as well on the 26th with 14 victories, mainly posted by Hanson, Aldrich, Spears and Warner. In all, Owens' pilots claimed 85 victories in January. The squadron's last month of aerial combat netted 19 more in February, mostly over New Britain.

Under Owens, VMF-215 had been competitive as a unit, as had its individual pilots. A scoring race emerged, with Bob Hanson, Don Aldrich and Harold Spears claiming half the unit total. The "Fighting Corsairs" emphasized the star system, with ten aces accounting for 85 percent of total victories scored. In comparison, during the Solomons campaigns

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VMF-121's aces scored 55 percent of the unit's victories, VMF-221's figure was 65 percent and VMF-112's was 43 percent.

The "Fighting Corsairs'" success was purchased at a price, however – at least 21 planes were destroyed with ten pilots killed or missing. Returning from a scoreless mission to Rabaul on February 3, Hanson descended to strafe and was killed by ground fire.

In March and April 1944 VMF-215 reformed with new personnel under Maj Jim Gill, then continued operating against Rabaul and the Bismarcks. After another reorganization in May, the squadron returned to the US in October. VMF-215 was temporarily deactivated at El Toro in November, but in early 1945 it moved to Ewa, finishing the war as a replacement training unit with F4Us and F6Fs. The squadron was led by the highly experienced Lt Col Bill Millington until he was replaced by ex-VMF-223 pilot Maj Alan Armstrong.

The "Fighting Corsairs'" aces suffered a high attrition rate, with four of the top five being killed either in action or in flying accidents and Warner being injured in Spears' fatal crash in December 1944.

Wartime COs

Capt J. L. Neefus	July 9, 1942
Lt Col H. H. Williamson	October 1, 1943
Maj R. G. Owens	December 6, 1943
Maj J. K. Gill	February 27, 1944
Maj B. S. Hargrave Jr	June 8, 1944
1Lt A. E. Ennis	September 12, 1944
Maj W. P. Boland	November 21, 1944
Maj E. J. Nelson	March 2, 1945
Lt Col W. A. Millington	May 2, 1945
Maj A. J. Armstrong	July 2, 1945

Subsequent record
Deactivated November 13, 1945

VMF-216 "Bulldogs"

GENEALOGY
Established at El Centro on January 1, 1943
DEPLOYMENTS
Solomons – November 1943 to July 1944 (F4U-1)
Marianas – August to December 1944 (F4U-1)
USS *Wasp* (CV-18) – February-March 1945 (F4U-1D)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
27.333 victories, no aces
TOP SCORERS
four pilots with two victories each

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The "Bulldogs" were organized at El Centro, California, on New Year's Day 1943 under Capt W. P. Addington, who was relieved by Capt Max Read at month's end. In September, with Maj Rivers "Bulldog" Morrell now CO, the squadron sailed for Hawaii aboard the first escort carrier, USS *Long Island* (CVE-1). VMF-216 arrived at Espiritu Santo in early November 1943, then relieved VMF-211 in the Russell Islands. The squadron advanced to Bougainville in early December, beginning a long tenure in the upper Solomons. The unit thus became the first to operate from the newly bulldozed Torokina airstrip, which served as a springboard to Rabaul.

On December 19, 1943 the squadron lost two pilots who reportedly diverted to assist B-24s under attack. Things got worse two days after Christmas when two more pilots were lost in predawn takeoffs and another killed in the squadron's first significant combat. Over Rabaul the Corsairs claimed eight kills, two to future CO Maj Ben Hargrave. The next day (December 28) 13 pilots were credited with 17 victories, with doubles being claimed by Lts R. F. Anderson, R. E. Marker and C. C. Schwartz.

Following R&R in Sydney in January 1944, VMF-216's pilots expected more combat upon their return. However, by the time the unit's reorganization was completed in the New Hebrides, action in the Solomons had settled down. The sole kill of the next tour was scored by 1Lt J. S. Patton Jr on March 12, 1944. Upon rotating out of the Solomons in July the squadron had notched 26.333 victories.

Redeployed to Guam in August 1944, the "Bulldogs" launched from USS *Santee* (CVE-29) to become the first Corsair squadron ashore at Orote. The unit flew local patrols and strikes until assigned carrier training in Hawaii before year's end. At the time Maj George Dooley had 14 second lieutenants, nine first lieutenants and four captains under his charge. VMF-216 and VMF-217 joined CVG-86 embarked in *Wasp* in February 1945, supporting operations over Japan, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. VMF-216 lost five planes in the first month at sea, with two pilots MIA. The only score of the carrier cruise came during the Tokyo strike on February 16 when 1Lt C. L. Cochran splashed a Yokosuka D4Y "Judy". VMF-216 departed Hawaii for home in late March, being based at Santa Barbara at war's end.

Wartime COs

Capt W. P. Addington	January 1, 1943
Capt M. R. Read	January 26, 1943
Maj R. J. Morrell Jr	June 3, 1943
Maj B. S. Hargrave Jr	January 22, 1944
Maj J. Fitting Jr	May 5, 1944
Maj R. L. Blume Jr	October 31, 1944
Maj G. E. Dooley	December 8, 1944
1Lt G. F. Kelley	April 19, 1945
Maj R. L. Anderson	May 21, 1945

Subsequent record

Deactivated on March 19, 1946. Re-established as VMR-216 at Whidbey Island in 1958 and deactivated at Whidbey Island on December, 21 1972

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VMF-217 "Max's Wild Hares"

GENEALOGY
Established at El Centro on July 1, 1943
DEPLOYMENTS
Solomons – January to June 1944 (F4U-1)
Marianas – August to November 1944 (F4U-1)
USS *Wasp* (CV-18) – February-March 1945 (FG-1D)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
19 victories, no aces
TOP SCORERS

1Lt L. E. Russell	3
1Lt W. P. White	3

Maj Max Read led VMF-217 through its first 17 months, affording unusual continuity of leadership. After organization and training at El Centro, California, exchanging Wildcats for Corsairs in September, the "Wild Hares" proceeded to San Diego and points west. They arrived at Espiritu Santo in January 1944, continuing to Bougainville that month. The first victory went to 1Lt L. E. Russell on the 31st, with an active February producing 16 more claims during the hard-fought Rabaul campaign and covering the Green Island landing.

From February through April the "Hares" lost nine Corsairs, with four pilots dead or missing, to all causes. The flight echelon moved to Espiritu from mid March through May 1944, then prepared for eventual deployment to Guam. On August 4 VMF-217 was one of four MAG-21 squadrons flown ashore from the escort carrier USS *Santee* (CVE-29). Maj Jack Amende succeeded Read at year end, his Corsairs flying patrols and strikes in the Marianas until a new mission arose. After extra training at Ulithi, stressing navigation, the "Wild Hares" joined VMF-216 aboard *Wasp* in February 1945. Amende's pilots resumed scoring during the Tokyo strikes of February 16 – exactly one year after the previous combats at Rabaul. Five kills were credited in the Tokyo operation that cost skipper Jack Amende on the 17th. He was succeeded by Maj George Buck for the duration of the cruise.

On February 21 VMF-216 and VMF-217 provided direct air support to Marine infantry on Iwo Jima, strafing just ahead of the 4th Marine Division, repeating the process the next day. February operations cost five planes and two pilots besides Amende. In March VMF-217 lost one plane, with the pilot recovered. Late that month the flight echelon returned to Ewa, leaving some maintenance personnel aboard ship. The squadron was reunited at Miramar in April. Two junior officers took over Stateside in April and May before Maj Herb Peters arrived. He still had the squadron at El Toro in August 1945.

Wartime COs

Maj M. R. Read Jr	July 1, 1943
Maj J. R. Amende Jr (KIA)	December 17, 1944
Maj G. S. Buck	February 17, 1945
Maj H. A. Peters	May 23, 1945

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Subsequent record

Deactivated in San Diego on March 19, 1946. Re-established at South Weymouth in 1953 and redesignated as VMA-217 in 1958. Deactivated at South Weymouth in 1964

VMF-218 "Hellions"

GENEALOGY
Established at Mojave on September 15, 1943
DEPLOYMENTS
Solomons – January to November 1944 (F4U-1)
Philippines – November 1944 to September 1945 (F4U-1D)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
18 victories, no aces
TOP SCORER
1Lt J. V. Booker 2

Organized under Capt R. R. Read in July 1943, VMF-218 was commissioned in September with Maj Horace Pehl in command. After being transported to the Pacific aboard the escort carrier USS *Barnes* (CVE-20), the air and ground echelons were united on Bougainville by February 1944, where Corsairs supported the Green Island landings that month. Pehl and 1Lt Millard Fowler claimed the "Hellions'" first victories on a Rabaul mission on February 3, with the squadron adding six more that month against a loss of six to all causes. After recycling to Espiritu in March and April the squadron advanced to Green Island, remaining there until November 1944.

During the Philippines campaign VMF-218 first served under Maj Bob Kingsbury, originally based on Leyte. The MAG-12 Corsairs flew a near-epic oceanic trip of nearly 2,000 miles to reach their new base. A brief flurry of air combat occurred in December, with six kills over the Viscayan Sea on the 11th and four more later in the month. In all the squadron lost ten Corsairs in December, with three pilots dead or missing. In the new year the "Hellions" moved to Tacloban, flying CAS for US Army units as well as convoy patrols and strike missions. The unit's 18th and last shootdown was claimed by two lieutenants on January 6, 1945, while six F4Us were written off that month.

In March 1945, now under Maj John Massey, the "Hellions" capped the Zamboanga landings, shortly basing there. Several more pre-invasion missions were logged over Bongao, Jolo and the Malabang area. Massey's pilots continued attack missions on Mindanao for the duration of hostilities, losing 18 planes from February through July. The "Hellions" were still flying from Zamboanga on VJ Day, after which they moved to China for a year. Rotating between Peking and Guam, VMF-218 stood down in 1949.

Wartime COs

Maj H. A. Pehl	July 16, 1943
Maj R. T. Kingsbury	September 29, 1944
Maj J. M. Massey	January 31, 1945

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Subsequent record

Deactivated on Guam on December 31, 1949, the unit was re-established at Willow Grove circa 1957. It was deactivated at Willow Grove circa 1965

VMF-221 "Fighting Falcons"

GENEALOGY
Established in San Diego on July 11, 1941
DEPLOYMENTS
Midway – December 1941 to June 1942 (F2A-3 and F4F-3)
Solomons – February to December 1943 (F4F-4 and F4U-1)
USS *Bunker Hill* (CV-17) – December 1944 to June 1945 (F4U-1A/C)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
155 victories, 10 aces
TOP SCORERS

Capt J. E. Swett	15.5
Capt W. N. Snider	11.5
Capt H. E. Segal	10 (+2 with VMF-211)
1Lt E. Dillow	6

Despite having been in existence only five months, VMF-221 boarded USS *Saratoga* (CV-3) the day after the Pearl Harbor attack. Maj Vern McCaul had little time to train his pilots, although veterans of the squadron said that most second lieutenants could defeat the popular skipper in mock combat! "Sara" took the Marines' Buffaloes on the doomed Wake Island relief effort, then launched them for Midway, where VMF-211 joined the garrison air force. Capt Jim Neefus scored the squadron's first victory – a Kawanishi H6K (later called "Mavis") flying boat – on March 10, then succeeded McCaul in April. But more seniority was required for the CO, so he was replaced by Maj Floyd Parks in early May. "Red" Parks had unusual experience, having been a sailor before entering Annapolis and graduating in 1934.

Four weeks later VMF-221 was destroyed in the Battle of Midway. Twenty-three Buffaloes and Wildcats scrambled to intercept 107 Japanese carrier aircraft, with 16 US Marine Corps fighters being shot down and 14 pilots lost, including Parks. Of the surviving planes, only two remained operational. The squadron claimed 12 kills, including victories for future aces Marion Carl and Charlie Kunz.

Following rebuilding at Ewa, VMF-221 deployed for the Solomons in February 1943, led by Capt Bob Burns. The normal combat tour of three rotations to the frontlines occupied the "Fighting Falcons" until November. The new squadron logged its first combat on April 1, with seven kills over the Russells – three of these were credited to 1Lt William N. Snider. The huge Japanese raid against Guadalcanal six days later produced 18 claims by 11 pilots, with 1Lt Jim Swett taking top honors by scoring seven confirmed and a probable. Hit by both Japanese and American gunfire, he had to ditch his riddled Wildcat, but it was a Medal of Honor performance.

Burns' pilots transitioned to Corsairs in May, shortly before Maj Monfurd Peyton assumed command. In a hard-fought battle covering the New Georgia landings on June

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30, the "Falcons" splashed 16 "Zekes" and "Bettys", with Jim Swett again being the top scorer with two and one shared destroyed, while 1Lts Frank Baldwin, Warner Chapman and the colorful Harold "Manny" Segal claimed doubles. The latter always scored in multiples, downing three planes on July 11, before getting splashed himself. Jim Swett added to his score that day, but later described himself as Segal's "swimming partner."

Peyton led the squadron's third forward tour at Vella Lavella late that year, concluding combat over Bougainville on November 17 with Segal and Maj Nathan Post each claiming triples. Then VMF-221 was withdrawn to Efate, returning to ConUS in January 1944. Peyton conducted turnaround training at Santa Barbara, ending his 16-month tenure when relieved by Maj Edwin Roberts in October 1944. At year-end the "Fighting Falcons" joined VMF-451 in *Bunker Hill*, flying with CVG-84. The Corsairs participated in the first carrier strikes on Tokyo on February 16-17, 1945, when Solomons veteran Capt Bill Snider teamed with 1Lt Don MacFarlane to down a "Betty". On the afternoon of March 18 Roberts' pilots fought one of their hardest combats of the war. A large dogfight around Tomitaka airfield yielded 13 kills, with three of them going to Bill Snider to make him the US Marine Corps' first carrier-based ace.

April was full of combat over Okinawa and off Japan. A dozen enemy aircraft fell on the sixth, with 2Lt George Johns scoring a triple. In all the "Fighting Falcons" claimed 46 kills that month, concluding with 14 off Izema Shima, near Okinawa, on the 28th. That combat made aces of John McManus, who scored four times, Dean Caswell and Don Balch. On May 11 *Bunker Hill* was severely damaged by kamikazes, knocking her out of the war. Thirty men from the two embarked US Marine Corps squadrons were among the 389 total dead. "Zeke" Swett scored his last victory that day, but like other airborne CAG-84 pilots, landed aboard *Enterprise*.

In three months of combat the "Fighting Falcons" had lost six pilots and 15 planes, plus 11 Corsairs in the kamikaze attack.

The squadron's carrier and rear echelons were reunited in June and based at El Centro at war's end.

VMF-221 remained the US Marine Corps' second-ranking fighter squadron with 155 victories. Additionally, the "Falcons" received the Presidential Unit Citation for their Midway action and the *Bunker Hill* deployment, plus a Navy commendation.

Wartime COs

Maj V. J. McCaul	October 6, 1941
Capt J. L. Neefus	April 19, 1942
Maj F. B. Parks (KIA)	May 8, 1942
Capt K. Armistead	June 4, 1942
Lt Col L. S. Moore	August 8, 1942
Maj H. J. Mitchener	October 6, 1942
Capt R. R. Burns	February 19, 1943
Maj M. K. Peyton	June 1, 1943
Maj E. S. Roberts Jr	October 12, 1944

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Subsequent record
Deactivated at El Centro on September 10, 1945

VMF-222 "Flying Deuces"

GENEALOGY
Established at Midway on March 1, 1942
DEPLOYMENTS
Midway, Hawaii – March to September 1942 (F2A-3)
Solomons – September 1943 to January 1945 (F4U-1)
Philippines – January to May 1945 (F4U-1D)
Okinawa – May to September 1945 (F4U-4)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
53 victories, 2 aces
TOP SCORERS

Maj D. H. Sapp	10
2Lt C. D. Jones	6

The "Flying Deuces" were unusual in being formed outside ConUS, having been established at Midway on March 1, 1942. Ten days later the CO, Capt Robert M. Haynes, commanding 12 Buffaloes, was vectored to intercept a Kawanishi H6K (later codenamed "Mavis") flying boat, although the kill was made by sister-squadron VMF-221. The next month Haynes' unit went to Ewa, Hawaii, remaining here until ordered Stateside in September.

Reorganized under Capt Max Volcansek, the "Deuces'" air echelon departed Santa Barbara for Ewa in March 1943, returning to Midway in May. Upon reunion with the ground element that same month, the squadron deployed to Espiritu Santo in the summer. The advance element's Corsairs landed at Guadalcanal on September 3, and progressively moved up the Solomons to Munda, settling at Vella Lavella in November. Sweeps over Munda and Kahili initiated Volcansek's pilots to combat in early September, with the first confirmed kills on the 13th. The executive officer, Maj Al Gordon, claimed two of the six confirmed on that date. Gordon relieved Volcansek in early November, leading the squadron to a total of 29 victories by year-end. The "Deuces" flew the first Rabaul fighter sweep on December 17, and by January 1, 1944 Maj Don Sapp had four victories and 2Lt Charles D. Jones three.

In January 1944 the flight echelon moved to Efate and the groundcrews to Bougainville. The squadron claimed 21 more victories in February and March, with Sapp notching his fifth kill over Tobera airfield, on Rabaul, on February 3 en route to the "Deuces'" top slot. Jones made ace in the same area on the 15th. Sapp continued scoring steadily, making his ninth and tenth claims at Tobera on March 12. However, that same month Japanese artillery rendered the Piva airstrip untenable, forcing Maj Roy Spurlock's command to Emirau, in the Bismarcks. The squadron's last Solomons victory was scored by 2Lt Roland Heilman, who splashed a "Zeke" at Kavieng on June 13. During its combat tour the squadron lost at least 18 planes and three pilots.

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VMF-222 was held in reserve at Green Island from August 1944 to January 1945 when the Philippines campaign employed more Marine air. Spurlock took the "Flying Deuces" to Samar that month and was relieved by Maj Harold Harwood in late April. Subsequently the squadron flew its F4U-4s to Okinawa in late May, operating under MAG-14. The "Deuces'" last three victories were scored on June 22, 12 months after the previous kill. Capt Ken Walsh got the first of the three, his 21st of the war. Losses were notably light at Okinawa – three of the squadron's Corsairs were destroyed and one pilot, Lt J. A. Austin, killed on June 21. The "Deuces" were flying from Awase, in central Okinawa, when Japan surrendered.

Wartime COs

Capt R. M. Haynes	March 1, 1942
Capt M. J. Volcansek Jr	September 28, 1942
Maj A. N. Gordon	November 5, 1943
Maj R. T. Spurlock	April 6, 1944
Maj H. A. Harwood	April 28, 1945

Subsequent record
Deactivated at Cherry Point on December 31, 1949

VMF-223 "Rainbow" and "Bulldogs"

GENEALOGY
Established at Ewa on May 1, 1942
DEPLOYMENTS
Guadalcanal – August to October 1942 (F4F-4)
Solomons – November 1943 to January 1945 (F4U-1)
Philippines – January to May 1945 (F4U-1/1C)
Okinawa – June to September 1945 (F4U-4)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
147.5 victories, 9 aces
TOP SCORERS

Maj J. L. Smith	19
Capt M. E. Carl	17.5 (+1 with VMF-221)
Capt K. D. Frazier	12.5

In May 1942 Capt John L. Smith was a tough, no-nonsense officer who had never held a command. Nevertheless, he built one of the finest US Marine Corps squadrons of the Guadalcanal campaign. Upon forming at Ewa his exec was Capt Rivers Morrell, an Annapolis football star, and the engineering officer was Capt Marion Carl, who had scored a victory at Midway. Six pilots from other squadrons were attached to Smith before arrival at "Cactus", and seven more reported aboard during the Guadalcanal tour. Quickly carrier qualified, the squadron boarded *Long Island* for delivery to Guadalcanal

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on August 20. Now-Maj Smith took 19 Wildcats ashore with Lt Col Dick Mangrum's 12 SBD-3s. At Guadalcanal Smith and Carl would become the first major American aces of the war.

The Wildcats were badly needed, and went to work immediately. On the 21st Smith downed a Zero and 2Lt Gene Trowbridge claimed two in a fight between Lunga Point and Savo Island. Combat continued daily, peaking on the 24th – the day of the carrier clash known as the battle of the Eastern Solomons. The light carrier *Ryujo* launched B5N "Kates" against Henderson Field, and during the day the Marines reported splashing 12 torpedo-bombers and four Zeroes. Marion Carl's four victories made him the first Marine ace, including his Midway Zero. 2Lt Z. A. Pond was credited with two single-engine bombers and a fighter. Trowbridge, proving highly consistent, contributed a bomber and fighter while 2Lts Ken Frazier and Fred Gutt also got doubles. Smith's pilots scored on each of their first six days ashore, totaling 28 victories through August 29. Smith became an ace that day with two "Bettys".

During late August and mid September Smith's unit was augmented by Maj Bob Galer's VMF-224 and the US Navy's VF-5. Meanwhile, "loaner" pilots joined Smith from VMF-212. Fighting 223 lost three planes on September 19, with Carl and 1Lt Clayton Canfield turning up safe but Pond remained missing. On September 28, in Marion Carl's words, "We really cleaned them out," claiming 23 of 27 raiders. The numbers were widely optimistic (the Japanese lost eight), but the "Cactus Air Force" was holding its own. Smith was shot down again on October 2, the CO coming down close enough to the airfield to be able to walk in. In the first three weeks ashore VMF-223 lost 18 Wildcats, including 14 to enemy action – seven in aerial combat, four damaged beyond repair and three bombed on the field. Four more were written off in operational accidents.

The squadron's final "Cactus" combat occurred on October 10 when Smith and four others splashed six floatplanes. That evening the squadron found time to celebrate Fred Gutt's 23rd birthday, dress varying between khaki, striped shirts and pajamas. Upon leaving Guadalcanal on October 12, VMF-223 had claimed 110 kills, including 23 by 11 pilots from VMF-212 and VMF-121. The latter included five by Marine Gunner Henry Hamilton and four by Joe Bauer, with contributions by "Fritz" Payne, "Doc" Everton, Jack Conger and Frank Drury. The squadron lost six pilots killed in action or accidents, with four more evacuated with injuries.

Smith was relieved immediately and returned Stateside for an eventual Medal of Honor. Upon reforming in January 1943, now-Maj Marion Carl took over and prepared to return to combat in Corsairs. The squadron was back in the Solomons that November, with Carl scoring one of four victories in F4Us near Rabaul on December 23. Sweeps and escorts to New Britain provided most of VMF-223's activity through March, with now-Capt Fred Gutt adding to his Guadalcanal tally. Maj Bob Keller relieved Carl in early February, succeeded by two other COs through January 1945. At that time Maj Bob Flaherty took the squadron to the Philippines where, under MAG-14, it supported the US Army on Samar until called to Okinawa that spring.

Maj Howard King led the squadron's new F4U-4s to Kadena, Okinawa, in June, but it missed most of the air-to-air opportunities. The "Rainbow" Squadron claimed four

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"Tojos" over Amami O Shima on June 21, which proved to be the last victories in VMF-223's long war. Under Maj Julius "Buck" Ireland, a VMF-211 ace, the squadron finished the conflict at Awase.

VMF-223 was recognized with Presidential Unit Citations almost three years apart, for Guadalcanal and the Ryukyu campaign.

Wartime COs

Capt J. L. Smith	May 1, 1942
Maj M. E. Carl	January 26, 1943
Maj R. P. Keller	February 4, 1944
Maj D. Drucker	July 3, 1944
Maj R. F. Flaherty	October 14, 1944
Maj H. E. King	April 17, 1945
Maj J. W. Ireland	July 24, 1945

Subsequent record

Redesignated VMA-223 on December 1, 1954, the unit currently flies AV-8B Harrier IIs from MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina

VMF-224 "Fighting Wildcats"

GENEALOGY
Established at Ewa on May 1, 1942
DEPLOYMENTS
Solomons – August to October 1942 (F4F-4)
Roi – January to March 1945 (F4U-1D)
Okinawa – April to September 1945 (F4U-1C)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
116.5 victories, 4 aces
TOP SCORERS

Maj R. E. Galer	13
1Lt G. L. Hollowell	8
Capt J. F. Dobbin	7.5

Previously with VMF-211, as a landing signal officer Bob Galer was held back from the Wake Island detachment, remaining in Hawaii to form VMF-224 in May 1942. He took the unit to Guadalcanal on 30 August, when it became only the second fighter squadron in the "Cactus Air Force." Galer's pilots included 2Lt Charlie Kunz, who had flown Buffaloes at Midway. On the unit's first patrol, on September 2, exec Maj John Dobbin led three rookies into combat. Apparently 2Lt Charles Bryans succumbed to oxygen problems – he and Dick Amerine were caught at a disadvantage and shot down. Amerine survived a week-long trek back to Henderson, killing four Japanese soldiers en route.

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Galer scored two of the squadron's first four victories that day, with frequent combat thereafter. By month-end the unit tally had reached 35 during eight days of action. However, there were further casualties. On September 5 2Lt R. A. Jeffries never returned from a strafing mission, and SSgt C. D. Garrabrant was killed in action. Four days later 2Lt J. M. Jones perished and two other Wildcats were lost.

The squadron's two best days were September 14, when John Dobbin splashed three floatplanes and a Zero while 2Lt George Hollowell also downed three floatplanes (Galer added an eighth victory), and October 9, when six bombers and three Zeroes were credited. Charlie Kunz and Matt Kennedy claimed doubles. Bob Galer remained an up-front leader, scoring steadily but not without penalty. He ditched his shot-up Wildcat after a lopsided dogfight on September 11, but quickly returned to the fighter strip. His leadership was recognized with a Navy Cross from Adm Nimitz on October 1. The next day he was knocked down again, fetching up safe at Tulagi. That same day two other VMF-224 fliers were lost in action.

Between August 21 and September 11 VMF-224 lost nine aircraft, although only four fell in combat. Five of Galer's original 20 pilots died at Guadalcanal, while the squadron absorbed seven pilots from VMF-212 and three from VMF-121. Of the replacements, 2Lt G. A. Treptow was killed and two more were evacuated.

The squadron left "Cactus" with 60.5 credited victories, paced by Galer with 13. The total included 6.5 victories by four pilots from VMF-212 (including Joe Bauer) and VMF-121. Despite his easy-going demeanor, Galer was blunt in his professional assessment, noting:

"A percentage of these pilots could be said to avoid combat, while the majority would accept but not look for combat. After a definite period a pilot who is undergoing daily alert periods and combat should be relieved before he is forced to request his relief from the medical department or before he is evacuated sick or wounded."

The VMF-224 personnel remaining ashore still faced serious peril. Three enlisted men were killed during the fearsome naval bombardment on the night of October 13-14. After further shelling on October 15-16, Galer led a final mission with John Dobbin and two other pilots escorting SBDs attacking Japanese shipping. Later that day the remaining VMF-224 aviators were evacuated on short notice, leaving only Galer, who surveyed prospective fighter strips. He boarded a transport aircraft on the 29th.

Back Stateside with a Presidential Unit Citation, VMF-224 reported to El Toro in December to begin rebuilding. Maj Darrell Irwin's men began exchanging Wildcats for Corsairs in June 1943, readying for a Pacific deployment. The "Fighting Wildcats" alit at Ewa in August, and the next month proceeded to American Samoa, then to Funafuti, in the Ellice Islands, under MAG-31. The squadron moved to Roi, in the Marshalls, in February 1944, flying against bypassed Japanese-held islands.

At length the Pacific War's progress beckoned from the northern horizon. In April 1945 Maj Jim Poindexter led the "Wildcats" to Okinawa, but soon turned over to Bob Hammond at Yontan. However, Hammond stayed less than a month before Al Barnum took over in mid June, remaining CO through to the end of hostilities.

VMF-224's first combat in the new arena occurred on April 8 when six pilots shared three "Oscars". The squadron had its best day on May 4 with 12 victories in two

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combats. Top scorer at Okinawa was 2Lt Jim Bender with 3.5 victories, while three others claimed three apiece. The final combat was logged on the morning of July 2 on a sweep off Kyushu. Four "Tonys" were splashed, two by Capt Joe Lynch, a VMF-112 Guadalcanal veteran. He scored his fifth and sixth kills that day, then ditched his shot-up Corsair.

The "Fighting Wildcats" claimed 55 shootdowns at Okinawa, earning a second Presidential Unit Citation. VMF-224 lost 25 Corsairs there, with eight aviators killed or missing. Barnum's squadron was based at Chimu from July onward, then served postwar at Yokohama until June 1946, when it returned to El Toro.

Wartime COs

Maj R. E. Galer	May 1, 1942
Maj D. D. Irwin	December 5, 1942
Maj H. A. York	August 25, 1944
Maj J. W. Poindexter	December 31, 1944
Maj R. C. Hammond	May 31, 1945
Maj A. T. Barnum	June 15, 1945

Subsequent record

Redesignated VMA(AW)-224 on November 1, 1966, the unit was redesignated VMFA(AW)-224 on March 5, 1993. It currently flies F/A-18D Hornets from MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina

VMF-225

GENEALOGY
Established at Mojave on January 11, 1943
DEPLOYMENTS
Marianas – Aug 1944 to May 1945 (F4U-1)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
1 victory
TOP SCORER
2Lt H. L. Stewart 1

A veteran of VMF-111's frustrating Samoan venture in 1942, Capt Jack Amende was described by a contemporary as "bright and witty." He built his own squadron – VMF-225 – from the ground up at Mojave, and by June 1943 he owned two Wildcats and two Corsairs, retaining both types to September, after which enough F4Us were available. Maj Jim Embry took the squadron to Ewa, Hawaii, at the end of October 1943 and proceeded to Espiritu Santo in March 1944. In anticipation of the Marianas campaign, VMF-225 left for Eniwetok in June. In July the ground echelon established facilities on Guam a week after D-Day, with the flight section landing in early August to provide local air defense.

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In a rare evolution, Amende resumed command in early September, remaining almost until year's end. Combat action was rare, with the squadron losing a plane and pilot on October 8 and two more the next month. Three more Corsairs were written off through to the end of the deployment in March.

On January 14, 1945 2Lt Henry Stewart caught a Nakajima B6N "Jill" torpedo-bomber north of Guam for the squadron's only aerial victory.

At the end of its tour VMF-225 was briefly led by Maj Hunter Reinburg, who had previously undertaken a lengthy tour commanding VMF-122. In May Maj John Reeder's unit was withdrawn to Mojave for CQs, Amende having proceeded to command VMF-217 embarked in USS *Wasp* (CV-18). VMF-225 was still at Mojave when hostilities ended in August 1945, however.

Wartime COs

Capt J. R. Amende Jr	January 1, 1943
Maj J. A. Embry Jr	August 26, 1943
Maj J. R. Amende Jr	September 3, 1944
Maj J. C. Musselman Jr	December 8, 1944
Maj J. H. Reinburg	April 17, 1945
Maj J. A. Reeder	May 17, 1945
Maj J. R. Stack	July 1, 1945

Subsequent record

Redesignated VMA-225 on June 17, 1952, the unit became VMA(AW)-225 on May 5, 1966. Deactivated at El Toro on June 15, 1972, it was reactivated as VMFA(AW)-225 at El Toro on July 1, 1991. The unit currently flies F/A-18D Hornets from MCAS Miramar, California

VMBF-231 "Ace of Spades"

GENEALOGY

Activated as VO-8M in 1934, redesignated as VMS-2 in 1937, VMSB-231 at Ewa on July 1, 1941 and VMBF-231 at Majuro on October 14, 1944

DEPLOYMENTS

Majuro – October 1944 to September 1945 (SBD, F4U-1 and SB2C-4)

AERIAL COMBAT RECORD

no victories

Among the stalwarts of the "Cactus Air Force", VMSB-231 flew SBDs at Guadalcanal from August to November 1942. After a training cycle in the US, the "Ace of Spades" squadron moved to Midway in August 1943, then to Majuro Atoll in February 1944. There, the Dauntlesses conducted 4th MAW operations against the Marshalls.

In mid-October 1944 the unit was redesignated VMBF-231, but it continued flying SBDs through November. The squadron transitioned to Corsairs in December – the month that VMBF-231 reverted to a VMSB once again, and flew them through

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March 1945. VMSB-231 finally converted to SB2C-4s in April and retained Helldivers for the duration. The "Ace of Spades" squadron was still in the Marshalls at war's end.

Wartime CO

Maj W. E. Abblitt	September 5, 1944

Subsequent record

Redesignated VMTB-231 in September 1945, deactivated on March 19, 1946 and reactivated as VMA-231 on May 15, 1973 as the first AV-8A Harrier squadron. Unit currently flies AV-8B Harrier IIs from MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina

VMF-251 "Lucifer's Messengers"

GENEALOGY

Established in San Diego as VMO-251 on December 1, 1941 and redesignated VMF-251 on January 31, 1945

DEPLOYMENTS

Guadalcanal – January to June 1943 (F4F-4/7)
Solomons – March to December 1944 (F4U-1)
Philippines – January to May 1945 (F4U-1)

AERIAL COMBAT RECORD

33 victories, no aces

TOP SCORERS

2Lt H. A. Peters	4
1Lt M. R. Yunck	3 (+2 with VMF-311)

Observation Squadron 251 was established under Capt E. E. Bard in December 1941, and he turned the unit over to Maj John Hart later that same month. The squadron was alerted for duty in New Zealand in May 1942, but orders changed, sending it to Espiritu Santo. There, its mechanics maintained USAAF and US Navy aircraft as well as their own, some personnel also flying photo-reconnaissance missions in B-17s.

VMO-251 was often an orphan, administratively if not factually. Said Maj William R. Campbell, "We never knew what squadron we were in – we were never carried as an administrative unit."

Under veteran aviators John Hart and Joe Renner VMO-251 performed more as a fighter than observation squadron. Guadalcanal combat produced 33 victories between November 1942 and February 1943, six on January 15.

Upon its return to ConUS in July 1943, VMO-251 refitted and began a second Pacific tour under Maj Bill Humberd, a Midway survivor. In February 1944 the squadron flew from Espiritu Santo and Green Island before moving to Bougainville. There, from June to December, VMO-251's Corsairs targeted the enemy in the Bismarcks. Humberd moved the redesignated VMF-251 to Samar in January 1945, turning over to Maj W. L. Bachelor the next month. In April the squadron's ninth CO

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was Maj T. W. "Boot" Furlow, who had been a second lieutenant in VMF-121 on Guadalcanal. The squadron continued supporting US Army infantry units to the end of the Philippines campaign. Furlow's effective ground echelon established a 98 percent in-commission rate between October 1944 and February 1945. VMF-251 was deactivated on Samar on June 1, 1945.

Wartime COs

Capt E. E. Baird	December 1, 1941
Maj J. N. Hart	December 12, 1941
Maj J. N. Renner	December 11, 1942
Capt C. H. Welch	April 1, 1943
Capt M. R. Yunck	May 15, 1943
Maj C. M. Longley	June 4, 1943
Maj W. C. Humberd	November 6, 1943
Maj W. L. Bacheler	February 10, 1945
Maj T. W. Furlow	April 15, 1945
1Lt G. F. Keithley	May 21, 1945

Subsequent record

Recalled to active duty on March 1, 1951, redesignated VMA-251 on May 29, 1951 and redesignated VMFA-251 on October 30, 1964. Unit currently flies F/A-18C Hornets from MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina

VMF-311 "Hell's Belles"

GENEALOGY
Established at Cherry Point on December 1, 1942
DEPLOYMENTS
Marshalls – February 1944 to January 1945 (F4U-1)
Okinawa – April to September 1945 (F4U-1C)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
71 victories, 1 ace
TOP SCORERS

2Lt W. P. Brown Jr	7
Capt R. F. Scherer	4.5
2Lt R. M. Barrett	4

Maj Ralph Rottet organized VMF-311 at Cherry Point, North Carolina, a week before Pearl Harbor. First equipped with SNJ trainers, the squadron transferred to Parris Island, South Carolina, in April 1943, where it received F4Us that summer and prepared for movement to the West Coast. "Hell's Belles" departed San Diego in September, bound for American Samoa. On October 6, 1943 Maj Harry Hooper's pilots launched 21 Corsairs

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from USS *Nassau* (CVE-16) to Pago Pago, Samoa, proceeding to Wallis Island, where the squadron served until January 1944 under MAG-31 control. Based at Kwajalein and Roi, the Corsairs flew strikes in the Marshalls, including considerable dive-bombing and strafing of bypassed enemy islands.

Majors Jack Kane and Harry Hooper alternated as CO from February 1943 through October 1944, when Charlie Kunz assumed command. The squadron averaged one plane lost per month in the Marshalls, with five aviators dead or missing in 14 Corsairs. VMF-121 Corsair ace Perry Shuman relieved Kunz in February 1945 and led the "Belles" to Okinawa in April.

Equipped with cannon-armed F4U-1Cs at Yontan, VMF-311 found frequent combat in the Ryukyus, beginning with a "Frances" intercepted 110 miles from base on April 7. Defending radar picket destroyers on the 16th, Perry Shuman's aviators splashed five "Vals" as the kamikaze crisis heightened. On the afternoon of the 28th the "Hell's Belles" notched 13 kills, with three pilots claiming doubles on "Vals" or "Zekes". It brought the unit total to 21 victories in three weeks, but May was even busier.

Orbiting at CAP stations "Victor" and "Zebra" on May 4, in two actions the "Belles" tied into a mixture of JAAF and IJN types, downing 15. 2Lt Bill Brown, who had claimed two "Vals" previously, added two "Tonys" and two Mitsubishi Ki-46 "Dinahs" to his score, becoming the squadron's only ace. The tally for May was 37 victories. Eight more kills were added in the first half of June, after which opportunities dropped off. Only four victories were recorded thereafter, all on July 2. The final wartime skipper, Mike Yunck, became an ace that day by adding two victories to his VMO-251 tally in 1942.

The greater pace of combat on Okinawa produced predictable casualties, as the squadron lost 16 planes and three pilots in five months. "Hell's Belles" were based at Chimu until the end of the war, mainly flying CAPs. The squadron served on occupation duty with MAG-31 at Yokosuka until May 1946.

Wartime COs

Maj R. K. Rottet	December 1, 1942
Capt J. D. Kane	February 27, 1943
Maj H. B. Hooper Jr	June 1, 1943
Maj J. D. Kane	July 6, 1943
Maj H. B. Hooper Jr	September 13, 1943
Maj C. M. Kunz	October 24, 1944
Maj P. L. Shuman	February 11, 1945
Maj M. R. Yunck	June 15, 1945

Subsequent record

Unit flew F9Fs in the Korean War, and among its pilots was Capt Ted Williams of the Boston Red Sox. Redesignated VMA-311 on June 7, 1957, it currently flies AV-8B Harrier IIs from MCAS Yuma, Arizona

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VMF-312 "Day's Knights" and "Checkerboards"

GENEALOGY
Established at Parris Island on June 1, 1943
DEPLOYMENTS
Hawaii and Admiralties – February 1944 to April 1945 (F4U-1)
Okinawa and Ie Shima – April to September 1945 (FG-1D)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
60.5 victories, 2 aces
TOP SCORERS

Capt H. J. Valentine	6
1Lt William Farrell	5
1Lt T. W. Hardy	3
Capt D. H. Johnson	3

"Day's Knights" were indeed the product of Richard Day, who perhaps set a record in the US Marine Corps by establishing and leading the same squadron for almost two years. Probably no other Marine combat fighter squadron had only two COs during the war.

The "Knights" took the long way to combat. Receiving F4Us in August 1943, they left the US in February 1944 and remained in Hawaii for three months further training. Then the flight and ground echelons proceeded independently to Ponam Island, in the Admiralties, awaiting Operation *Iceberg*, the invasion of Okinawa. Day took the squadron ashore on April 6, 1945, 14 months after sailing from San Diego. Serving under MAG-33, the unit was based at muddy Kadena for much of the Ryukyus campaign.

The "Knights'" first combat occurred on the afternoon of April 12 when three pilots splashed seven rookie suicide "Zekes", three falling to Capt Dan Johnson. A "Betty" went down that evening. "RadCAPs" over radar picket destroyers were a common feature of the Okinawa kamikaze blitz, with VMF-312 typically logging three to five victories daily. However, Day was killed by AA fire on May 14. After an interim CO, Maj Frank Cole permanently took over on the 24th. The new skipper's tenure began spectacularly – the next day his pilots claimed 16 kills 60 miles north of base. Capt Herb Valentine downed five fighters while 1Lt Bill Farrell contributed 4.5 confirmed and a probable. Another major kamikaze effort on April 6 produced 10.5 kills as four pilots each recorded 1.5 victories.

One of the most-reported episodes of the campaign involved two aggressive VMF-312 aviators. On May 10 the division, led by Capt Ken Reusser, sighted a high-flying Ki-45 "Nick" reconnaissance aircraft at an estimated 25,000ft and climbing. The four Corsairs began the chase, with two peaking below 36,000ft. Reusser and 1Lt Bob Klingman, having fired off much of their ammunition to lighten the load, continued to an incredible 38,000ft. Reusser expended his ammunition in damaging the twin-engined snooper, then Klingman closed in. Although his guns had frozen, and the Japanese gunner was still able to shoot, the Marine pressed home the attack. In three passes he used his 13ft diameter propeller to chop large sections from the Kawasaki's airframe, which came unglued. Klingman managed a dead-stick landing at base, missing part of his prop and with his airframe partly riddled.

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Two days later Klingman jumped from a disabled Corsair, being rescued by a destroyer that delivered him to the amphibious fleet flagship USS *Eldorado* (AGC-11), where he dined with Vice Adm Richmond K. Turner.

The squadron's shooting ended on May 22 with four more victories, all fighters. Under Day and Frank Cole VMF-312 ran up 60.5 victories at Okinawa, led by Valentine with six kills and Farrell with five. Capt Paul Brown became the last fatality, his F4U exploding from AA fire over Japan on July 12. In all, the "Knights" lost 30 aircraft and at least nine pilots killed or missing. The squadron was based at Awase on Okinawa's east coast at war's end.

Wartime COs

Maj R. M. Day	June 1, 1943
Maj F. Cole	May 25, 1945

Subsequent record

Redesignated VMA-312 on June 10, 1952, redesignated VMF-312 on February 15, 1954, redesignated VMF(AW)-312 on August 1, 1963 and redesignated VMFA-312 on February 1, 1964. The unit currently flies F/A-18C Hornets from MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina

VMF-313 "Lily Packin' Hellbirds"

GENEALOGY
Established at El Centro on October 1, 1943
DEPLOYMENTS
Philippines – December 1944 to May 1945 (FG-1A)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
9 victories, no aces
TOP SCORERS

Maj T. E. Olsen	2
2Lt C. R. Jarrett	2

The "Hellbirds" were established at El Centro, California, under Maj Hugh Russell. He rolled out after five weeks, eventually leading VMF-312 for a brief period on Okinawa. The second skipper was Maj Phil White, who had survived Midway in a Buffalo. He remained until Joe McGlothin assumed command in February 1944. White subsequently took over VMF-113 in late 1944. McGlothin took VMF-313 to Ewa, Hawaii, in March 1944, proceeding to Midway in April before returning to Ewa in June. The "Hellbirds" alit at Emirau in September, flying shipping attacks around Kavieng.

In early December VMF-313 joined MAG-12 in the Philippines, based at Tacloban on Leyte. The "Hellbirds" observed the third anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor by supporting a US Marine Corps–US Army attack on a Japanese convoy near the eastern exit of Surigao Strait. The next day VMF-313 engaged in the first of just two aerial combats the unit would experience during its tour, Maj Ted Olsen and 1Lt Lewis Hamity claiming "Oscars" near Negros Island.

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On December 11 the squadron claimed the sinking of a large transport vessel off Panay, pilots reporting that the ship went under in about four minutes. Later that day a VMF-313 division intercepted bomb-toting "Zekes" displaying suicidal intent toward a US convoy. Oddly, the kamikazes concentrated on the destroyer USS *Reid* (DD-369), three hits sinking her immediately. The Corsairs splashed five attackers, then returned to base perforated by US Navy AA fire in the understandable confusion.

On December 13 Ted Olsen, who had briefly commanded VMF-314, took off in heavily repaired F4U bearing 300 patches from battle damage suffered two days before. His Corsair "failed while airborne" and he fatally hit the tail bailing out.

The squadron covered the Cebu operation in March, then moved to Zamboanga that month.

From September 1944 through to its deactivation, the "Hellbirds" lost 19 aircraft and seven pilots. By far the worst month was January 1945, when five pilots and eight Corsairs were lost.

The squadron was deactivated on June 1, 1945 at Moret Field, Zamboanga.

Wartime COs

Maj H. I. Russell	October 1, 1943
Maj P. R. White	November 10, 1943
Maj J. H. McGlothin Jr	February 24, 1944
Maj J. M. Lomac	April 30, 1945

Subsequent record
Deactivated June 1, 1945

VMF-314 "Bob's Cats"

GENEALOGY
Established at Cherry Point on October 1, 1943
DEPLOYMENTS
Okinawa – May to September 1945 (F4U-1C)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
14 victories, no aces
TOP SCORERS

1Lt J. W. Leaper	3
1Lt W. L. Milne	2

Capt Ted Olsen established VMF-314 at Cherry Point, North Carolina, on October 1, 1943. He remained in charge for just a month, followed by three interim COs until Maj Bob Cameron arrived at the end of November. His presence established the squadron nickname, "Bob's Cats". VMF-314 departed the West Coast in June 1944, bound for Ewa, Hawaii, joining MAG-23. Like many squadrons, it rotated through Midway, returning to Hawaii in December. "Bob's Cats" remained in the islands until April 1945, when they

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transited to Engebi and on to Ie Shima, off Okinawa, in May, assigned to MAG-22.

1Lt Jerome Konzen scored the "Cats'" first victory when he downed a "Val" just north of the base on May 27. Only five more combats ensued, most notably with four kills on June 3 and the last five on the 22nd. In the latter, 1Lt John Leaper became the squadron's top shooter by scoring a triple.

In five months at Okinawa VMF-314 lost five aviators and 12 aircraft. All five of the killed or missing were lost in May.

The squadron flew from Chimu from mid July to VJ Day, with Cameron ending 21 months at the helm of VMF-314 in early August. Postwar, Maj Chris Lee led the "Cats" to Kyushu on occupation duty, returning to El Toro in November, thence to Cherry Point.

Wartime COs

Capt T. E. Olsen	October 1, 1943
Maj R. E. Cameron	November 29, 1943
Maj C. C. Lee	August 2, 1945

Subsequent record

Deactivated at Cherry Point on April 30, 1947, the unit was reactivated in Miami in 1952 and redesignated VMF(AW)-314 in 1957. Redesignated VMFA-314 in 1961, it currently flies F/A-18A++ Hornets from MCAS Miramar, California

VMF-321 "Hell's Angels"

GENEALOGY
Established at Cherry Point in February 1, 1943
DEPLOYMENTS
Solomons – December 1943 to April 1944 (F4U-1)
Marianas – August to December 1944 (F4U-1)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
39.666 victories, 1 ace
TOP SCORERS

1Lt R. B. See	5
1Lt J.A. Buzzard	4
Capt R. J. Norman	4

Early 1943 was a building period for US Marine Corps aviation. The critical 1942 battles had been won and the Guadalcanal struggle had ended, evolving into the wider Solomons campaign. Meanwhile, "Stateside" concerns focused on people and equipment. VMF-321 was no different than other units – personnel matters were foremost, as a shortage of qualified fighter pilots had resulted in low-time aviators or multi-engined pilots being assigned to the new squadron. Additional training was arranged at Oak Grove, North Carolina, before proceeding to San Diego. There, the squadron got a break, receiving a combat-experienced skipper, Maj Edmund F. Overend, previously CO of VMF-114.

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He had claimed six victories flying with the American Volunteer Group in 1941-42 and provided much-needed experience. The squadron began receiving Corsairs that summer, and was fully transitioned upon deploying to combat.

Overend's AVG service in the 3rd Pursuit Squadron led him to adopt the same "Hell's Angels" name for his new command, and it became official.

The squadron embarked in the escort carrier USS *Nassau* (CVE-16) in early October 1943, arriving in Samoa later that month. The ground echelon was prepositioned to receive 17 Corsairs catapulted from the "jeep" carrier while moored. Leaving its aircraft at Samoa, the "Hell's Angels" proceeded to Efate, in the New Hebrides, inheriting worn-out Corsairs from another squadron. Two planes were lost immediately to engine failure and a collision but the pilots survived.

Advancing through Vella Lavella in late December, Overend and his men began offensive operations against Rabaul. 1Lt Bob See claimed the first kill, a "Zeke" on the 28th, while Maj Dave Drucker logged two probables. On the move soon after, the "Angels" landed at Torokina, on Bougainville, on New Year's Day 1944. January would prove to be the "Angels'" busiest month, with combat on 15 days resulting in 41 credited kills. Four more were claimed by See, making him the "Angels'" only ace. In the Solomons deployment Overend extended his wartime tally by downing three planes for a total of nine.

Probably the "most thinly sliced" US Marine Corps victory of the war occurred on January 18 when 1Lt Clyde Askew downed a "Zeke" near Rabaul, then jumped another with his division and two Hellcats from VF-40. All six pilots received a decimal 0.166 share in the victory. The biggest scoring days were January 23 with six kills, three by Capt John Norman, and the 27th with seven. In the latter dogfight 1Lts Andrew Norman and Bob Baker each claimed doubles. The "Hell's Angels" closed their victory log with two more "Zekes" on January 27, credited to 1Lts Bob Keim and Jim Lamdin.

Following R&R in Sydney, the pilots returned to Bougainville in early March, then moved to Green Island. They were so successful at flying sea-control sweeps in the Bismarcks that no hostile contact ensued. Overend's command embarked for Guam in August 1944, bombing the islands of Rota and Pagan before landing at West Field, Guam. In October the skipper was relieved by Maj Justin Miller, who took VMF-321 home in mid December. Overend commanded a fighter training squadron for most of the remainder of the war.

In the year from December 1943 to December 1944 the "Hell's Angels" lost 30 aircraft and at least 11 pilots killed or missing. By far the worst period was January 1944, with no fewer than 15 Corsairs missing over Rabaul and eight pilots not recovered. The unit's last fatality was Maj L. S. Butler, who crashed on landing at Orote, Guam, on December 12.

Upon recycling on the West Coast, VMF-321 embarked for Hawaii aboard USS *Puget Sound* (CVE-113) as part of MASG-51. A week after the formal surrender in Tokyo Bay the "Hell's Angels" were bound for Hawaii, en route to occupation duty in Japan. They were back in California in January.

Wartime COs

Maj G. H. Knott	February 1, 1943
Maj E. F. Overend	October 1, 1944

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Maj J. H. Miller Jr	October 28, 1944
Maj W. P. Boland Jr	March 22, 1945

Subsequent record

Deactivated on January 28, 1946, reactivated at Anacosta in July 1946, redesignated VMA-321 on May 15, 1948 and redesignated VMFA-321 in December 1973. The unit deactivated on September 11, 2004

VMF-322 "Cannonballs"

GENEALOGY
Established at Cherry Point on July 1, 1943
DEPLOYMENTS
Emirau – September 1944 (F4U-1)
Espiritu – October 1944 to April 1945 (F4U-1)
Okinawa – April to September 1945(?) (F4U-1D)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
29 victories, no aces
TOP SCORERS

2Lt J. E. Webster	3.5
1Lt R. V. Kivlin	2.5
2Lt J. B. Seaman	2

Upon establishment at Cherry Point, North Carolina, VMF-322 moved to Parris Island, South Carolina, to begin preliminary training. At 23, Maj Fred Rauschenback was one of the youngest squadron commanders in the US Marine Corps. The "Cannonballs" received Corsairs in August, and in January 1944 proceeded to the West Coast for a Pacific deployment. After flying from Ewa, Hawaii, for several months the squadron alit at Emirau, in the Bismarcks, in September, then Espiritu Santo the next month.

The flight echelon left for Okinawa and landed here on April 9, 1945, assigned to MAG-33 at Kadena. Three days later Maj Jack Mathis and 1Lt Wiley Goff opened the squadron's victory log with a "Judy" and "Tony" during an early morning patrol. The ground echelon arrived on May 2, but nearly 200 ground personnel were aboard LST 599 when a kamikaze hit the ship, destroying most of the equipment and vehicles on board. Providentially, no Marines were killed, although several were wounded.

During the Okinawa campaign the "Cannonballs'" best day was 25 May when seven victories were claimed – all "Tojos" – near Ie Shima. Star of the fight was 2Lt Jim Webster with three confirmed and a probable. When Fred Rauschenback rolled out at the end of May he had held command for 23 months – a record for a US Marine Corps fighter squadron commander. Maj Walt Lischeid remained in command for the duration of hostilities (in Korea Lt Col Walt Lischeid went missing in action while commanding VMF-214 in September 1950).

On June 3 six pilots combined to splash three "Zekes" and two "Vals" north of Tori Shima, a small island south of Tokyo Bay. That same day the squadron supported the 2nd Marine Division on Iheya Shima, north of Okinawa. The "Cannonballs" moved to Awase

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airfield on July 15, where they remained at VJ Day. VMF-322 sustained 22 aircraft losses and four pilots during its Okinawa deployment.

While at Okinawa VMF-322 acquired a rare trophy in the form of an airworthy Ki-61 "Tony". Reportedly from the 19th or 23rd *Sentai*, it was found at Kadena under uncertain circumstances. In any case, the "Cannonballs" claimed the prize and squadron mechanics installed an American radio while adding "a pseudo-USMC paint scheme." Charlie Kunz flew it on July 21, escorted by a VMF-322 Corsair lest any local fighter pilots or AA gunners become overzealous.

Wartime COs

Maj F. M. Rauschenback	July 1, 1943
Maj W. E. Lischeid	May 31, 1945

Subsequent record

Deactivated on November 30, 1949. Reconstituted on July 6, 1951 and redesignated VMA-322 in May 1958. Deactivated on June 27, 1992

VMF-323 "Death Rattlers"

GENEALOGY
Established at Cherry Point on August 1, 1943
DEPLOYMENTS
Emirau – September-October 1944 (F4U-1)
Espiritu – October 1944 to February 1945 (F4U-1)
Manus – March 1945 (F4U-1)
Okinawa – April to September 1945 (F4U-1D)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
124.5 victories, 12 aces
TOP SCORERS

1Lt J. J. O'Keefe	7
1Lt J. W. Ruhsam	7
1Lt R. Wade	7

The leading fighter squadron of the Okinawa campaign took a long road to combat. Its first CO, Maj George Axtell, remained for nearly two years – one of the longest tenures in Marine aviation during World War II. Born in November 1920 and winged in May 1941, he was merely 22-years-old when he established the squadron. The "Death Rattlers" took their name from a huge rattlesnake killed on base while the squadron was training at El Centro, in California's southern desert.

In July 1944 VMF-323 sailed for Hawaii, proceeding to Emirau in September before moving to Espiritu Santo for four months. The northern trek involved a few weeks at Manus during March. The seven-month backwater limbo ended with arrival at Okinawa on April 2, 1945, just in time for the kamikaze season. Amid Kadena's rain and mud, with MAG-33 the "Rattlers" set up shop when the ground echelon arrived a week later. The

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colorful mess officer, 1Lt Sol Mayer, who had washed out of USAAF flight training, proved a significant US Marine Corps asset on Okinawa. He established "Mayer's Mess – Where the aces meet to eat," complete with a scoreboard that began to fill up. His prediction of "Death Rattler" aces was well founded.

Near-constant bombing and shelling, not to mention Japanese infiltrators, had many men understandably nervous. In one episode two VMF-323 noncoms were returning late from work and had not learned the night's password. When challenged near the dispensary they were unable to respond and were shot and wounded. Fortunately, if such can be said, the shooter was a US Navy doctor.

In the first months ashore the "Rattlers" lost nine aircraft, versus two in the previous seven months. But the squadron opened its scoring on 12 April with six kills over Motobu Peninsula, on the island's northwest coast. Axtell's pilots added 10.5 more on April 15-16, then hit the aerial jackpot on the 22nd. That evening VMF-323 was vectored onto a huge flock of kamikazes swarming the radar picket destroyers. The unit's Corsairs piled into a fighter pilot's paradise, the exec, Jeff Dorroh, recalling, "I could see it was going to be a long day so I switched off two of my guns." Attacking eight "Vals", he was credited with six destroyed and two probables in his only combat. Axtell and 1Lt Jerry O'Keefe downed five apiece, while 1Lt Bill Hood contributed 3.5. In all, seven "Death Rattlers" confirmed 24.5 victories – a US Marine Corps record one-day haul.

After 14 more kills on April 28, Axtell's "deadly passel of youngsters" narrowly broke their own record on the morning of May 4 when 12 pilots scored 24.75 victories – 1Lts Joe Dillard, John Ruhsam and Bob Wade each bagged four apiece. The "Rattlers'" third best day, 16 victories on June 3, still was among the top 12 daily tolls in the US Marine Corps.

When he departed in mid June George Axtell was among the longest serving of all US Marine Corps squadron COs, his tenure having lasted 22½ months. He moved up to command MAG-16 for the rest of the war. That same month VMF-323 began flying offensive missions to Japan, continuing until war's end. The "Rattlers" ended strongly, adding 16 victories west of Iheya Shima (four by 2Lt C. W. Drake) on June 3 and the last by 1Lt Joe Dillard over Japan on the 10th.

Martin Oelrich remained in command through September. The squadron was still at Kadena on VJ Day. In four-and-a-half months VMF-323 had produced a dozen aces – second only to VMF-121 throughout the war. During their time at Okinawa the "Rattlers" wrote off at least 27 Corsairs while losing five pilots. Despite a limited period in combat, VMF-323 finished eighth among all US Marine Corps fighter squadrons in terms of aerial victories.

Wartime COs

Maj G. C. Axtell Jr	August 1, 1943
Maj M. E. Oelrich	June 15, 1945

Subsequent record

Redesignated VMA-323 on June 30, 1952, redesignated VMF-323 on December 31, 1956, redesignated VMF(AW)-323 on July 19, 1962 and redesignated VMFA-323 on July 1, 1964. The unit currently flies F/A-18C Hornets from MCAS Miramar, California

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VMF-324

GENEALOGY
Established at Cherry Point on October 1, 1943
DEPLOYMENTS
Ewa – August 1944 (FG-1)
Midway – September 1944 to September 1945 (FG-1)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
no victories

VMF-324 spent nearly a year Stateside – a rarity among leatherneck squadrons other than operational training units. Under Maj Carl Longley, who had flown with VMO-251 at Guadalcanal, the squadron went cross-country to Miramar in July 1944. Detachments rotated through Mojave for training with bombs and rockets until the unit was ready for overseas service.

Fleshed out with a few combat veterans, VMF-324 sailed for Hawaii in late August and proceeded to Midway, where it spent most of the remainder of the war with MAG-23. While there VMF-324 lost three Corsairs in accidents, with 2Lt Walter Morton the only fatality, on January 20, 1945.

Wartime COs

Maj P. R. White	October 1, 1943
Maj C. M. Longley	November 15, 1943
Maj J. W. Merritt	August 4, 1945

Subsequent record

Deactivated at Miramar on October 15, 1945. Re-established as VMA-324 at Cherry Point on March 17, 1952, the unit was deactivated at Beaufort on August 29, 1974

VMBF-331 "Doodlebugs"

GENEALOGY
Established at Cherry Point as VMSB-331 on January 1, 1943, redesignated VMBF-331 in October 1944 and redesignated VMSB-331 on December 30, 1944
DEPLOYMENTS
Majuro – February 1944 to September 1945 (SBD, F4U-1 and SB2C-4)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
no victories

Flying Dauntlesses, VMSB-331 arrived in the Ellice Islands in late 1943, operating from Nukufetau and Tarawa. The flight and ground echelons independently moved to Majuro Atoll in early 1944. In late September the "Doodlebugs" learned that they would exchange their SBDs for F4Us, and Corsair missions began on October 28. During the transition

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they were led by Maj Jim Otis, whom squadron personnel considered "a fine gentleman with a twinkle in his eye." Popular with officers and enlisted men, Otis presided over monthly beer parties for all hands.

Primarily, VMBF-331 flew strikes against isolated Japanese islands in the Marshalls, but also logged reconnaissance and CAP flights. The squadron lost two aircraft in the Corsair period.

At year-end the job description changed again, and the "Doodlebugs" reverted to VMSB status, flying SB2C-4s until VJ Day.

Wartime COs

Maj J. C. Otis	May 10, 1944
Maj J. H. McEniry	December 18, 1944

Subsequent record

Redesignated VMSB-331 on December 30, 1944 and deactivated on November 21, 1945. Re-established as VMA-331 circa 1954, the unit was deactivated at Cherry Point on September 30, 1992

VMBF-333

GENEALOGY

Established at Cherry Point as VMSB-333 on August 1, 1943 and redesignated VMBF-333 on October 14, 1944

DEPLOYMENTS

Midway and Ewa – October to December 1944 (F4U-1D)

AERIAL COMBAT RECORD

no victories

"Triple Trey" was one of the few US Marine Corps squadrons without a nickname in World War II. Maj Leon Williamson was the primary commanding officer, holding the position for 22 months – a rare record of longevity in fighter squadrons, probably matched only by George Axtell of VMF-323 and slightly exceeded by Fred Rauschenback of VMF-322. Williamson had flown SB2Us at Midway.

VMSB-333 conducted anti-submarine training in Florida until June 1944, when it transferred to the West Coast and on to Hawaii. Denied combat opportunity, "Triple Trey" spent its entire Pacific deployment at Midway and MCAS Ewa, retaining SBD-5s for most of the three months it was designated a fighter-bomber squadron. Williamson's unit received Corsairs in November, retaining them until late December. During the F4U period the squadron lost four aeroplanes and two pilots – 1Lt James Zimmer on December 11 and 2Lt Peter Clinch four days later.

Upon reverting to Helldivers at year-end, the fighter-bomber unit became VMSB-333 again. It remained based at Ewa at the end of hostilities.

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Wartime COs

Capt R. F. Halladay	August 1, 1943
Maj R. J. Hoey	October 1, 1943
Maj L. M. Williamson	October 21, 1943
Maj J. Cosley	August 24, 1945
Maj P. H. Aliff	August 31, 1945

Subsequent record
Redesignated VMSB-333 on December 30, 1944 and deactivated on November 1, 1945

VMF-351

GENEALOGY
Established as VMO-351 at Cherry Point on March 1, 1943, redesignated VMO(CVS)-351 in December 1944 and redesignated VMF-351 on January 31, 1945
DEPLOYMENTS
USS *Cape Gloucester* (CVE-109) – April to September 1945 (FG-1D)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
5 victories, no aces
TOP SCORER
Lt Col D. K. Yost 2 (+6 with VMF-121)

Originally formed as an observation squadron at Cherry Point, North Carolina, the unnamed unit had an unsettled formative period with five commanding officers in the first eight months. Additionally, aircraft trickled in slowly, with the first Corsairs on hand as of October 1943, adding more into the new year. Some stability arrived in March 1944 with Maj Armond Delalio, who had flown SBDs at Midway. At the end of May the squadron counted 22 Vought, Goodyear and Brewster Corsairs on strength, and that month Delalio took VMO-351 to Bogue Field, North Carolina, joining Col Ed Pugh's MAG-51 for an exciting mission.

Project *Danny* was a plan to put four or five US Marine Corps fighter squadrons on escort carriers in the North Sea. Using Tiny Tim rockets, the Corsairs were expected to locate V1 "buzz bomb" launch sites and destroy them with the precision ordnance. However, the plan was cancelled and Delalio took his squadron to Mojave, California, in September. Newly intended for the Pacific Theater, VMO-351 conducted CQs aboard USS *Ranger* (CV-4) in early December, being redesignated VMO(CVS)-351 to denote the new assignment. However, it became a "straight" fighter squadron in January 1945.

As part of Lt Col Don Yost's MCVG-4, VMF-351 rode USS *Commencement Bay* (CVE-105) to WestPac, transferring to USS *Cape Gloucester* (CVE-109) for additional training. The squadron lost a pilot and two planes during the May and June preparation for combat. After Delalio turned over to Maj Charles McLean in early June, the carrier arrived at Leyte late that month and supported minesweeping operations and offensive

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missions in the East China Sea during the latter phase of the Okinawa campaign. Aerial opposition was rare but McLean's men capitalized on several opportunities, mainly in the East China Sea well west of Okinawa. On the morning of July 6 1Lt Phil Fuller splashed a "Dinah". In the same area on the 23rd 1Lt Carroll "Moose" Vogelaar downed another reconnaissance "Dinah" and Don Yost splashed a "Judy" later that morning.

In the southern portion of the Yellow Sea 1Lt Tom Doyle destroyed a Showa/Nakajima L2D "Tabby" transport on August 4. The following afternoon Yost made his eighth kill of the war – a "Frances" – some 31 months after his first victories with VMF-121 in the Solomons in December 1942. It was probably a record for combat longevity in US Marine Corps aviation.

CVE-109 was off Okinawa on VJ Day, and the squadron returned to the US in November.

In 1946 Maj Delalio became the first Marine to receive a helicopter rating, although Marion Carl had already soloed and flown helicopters without the formal rating for several years by then.

Wartime COs

Maj H. South	March 1, 1943
Capt D. B. Lenardson	April 1, 1943
Maj R. B. Cox	July 1, 1943
Maj T. O. Bales	August 17, 1943
Maj J. J. Canney Jr	November 1, 1943
Maj A. H. Delalio	March 1, 1944
Maj C. E. McLean Jr	June 5, 1945

Subsequent record

Deactivated November 9, 1945 and reactivated as a Reserve squadron in Atlanta on July 1, 1946. Redesignated VMA-351 in 1958, redesignated VMF-351 on July 1, 1962 and redesignated VMFA-351 in 1975. Deactivated in Atlanta on May 22, 1976

VMF-422 "Flying Buccaneers"

GENEALOGY
Established in San Diego on January 1, 1943
DEPLOYMENTS
Midway – December 1943 to January 1944 (F4U-1A)
Marshalls – May to October 1944 (F4U-1D)
Okinawa – May to September 1945 (FG-1D)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
15 victories, no aces
TOP SCORERS

2Lt P. L. Barnes	3
2Lt J. N. Snapper	3

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Following formation and training on the West Coast, VMF-422 shipped out for Pearl Harbor in October 1943, then on to Midway as base air defense into December. The CO by then was Maj John MacLaughlin, a 1938 Annapolis graduate with little operational experience. In mid December the squadron received new F4U-1As, taking 27 aboard USS *Kalinin Bay* (CVE-68) for transport to Tarawa in mid January 1944. From there the "Buccaneers" were directed to Funafuti, in the Ellice Islands, via Nanomea, New Caledonia, to alleviate crowding at Hawkins Field, Tarawa.

On the morning of January 25, 23 Corsairs left for Nanomea, nearly 500 miles distant. For unknown reasons MacLaughlin did not request a lead navigation aircraft and may have missed a weather briefing. In any event, en route weather proved worse than the CO had expected, and the flight turned into a shambles. About 15 minutes out of Nanomea weather forced MacLaughlin down to 200ft, whereupon he began a fruitless search for his destination, eventually disappearing. Several pilots went off on their own or lost contact with the formation, and finally Capt Cloyd Jeans, a VMF-223 "Cactus" veteran, directed a formation ditching. Fifteen planes went in the water and most pilots were saved after two days afloat. Only one pilot actually made it to Nanomea. Six others perished and 22 Corsairs were lost without cost to the enemy.

Replacement pilots were assigned by March, forming on Engebi, in Eniwetok Atoll, under Maj Elmer Wrenn. Among the replacements after the debacle was Capt Jeff DeBlanc, the eight-victory VMF-112 ace of Solomons fame. Assigned to the 4th MAW, the "Buccaneers" spent most of the year attacking bypassed Japanese bases in the Central Pacific. Part of the squadron deployed to Roi in late May for strikes against the Marshalls.

In January 1945 Wrenn was relieved by Maj Elkin Drew, who remained in command for the rest of the war. In late April he led the squadron to Okinawa, the flight echelon arriving at Ie Shima in late May for operations under the control of MAG-22. The "Buccaneers'" first combat resulted in five claims for enemy fighters near Iheya Shima on May 25. The next opportunity arose three days later when five pilots claimed nine kills. 2Lts Parker Barnes and John Snapper scored triples over "Nates" and "Vals" while the old Solomons hand Jeff DeBlanc notched his ninth of the war. Only one further claim arose – a "Nate" damaged on June 6.

On June 29 Jeff DeBlanc led a multi-squadron mission of 45 Corsairs against Ishigaki Island south of Okinawa. The VMF-422 planes carried bombs with variable-time fuses that would detonate above ground. Another comparable formation also targeted Ishigaki, prompting DeBlanc to quip, "With this strike force we would probably sink the island." But en route one F4U blew up for no obvious reason, then another. DeBlanc ordered his pilots to jettison their bombs and attack with their rockets, but some did not hear his order and two more Corsairs erupted. Examination of the wreckage post-mission showed that safety wires on the bombs had worked loose, allowing the small arming vanes to rotate and permitting the ordnance to explode.

The "Buccaneers" lost ten Corsairs at Okinawa, including the four pilots on June 29. Drew moved his squadron to Chimu Field on July 16, where it remained through to VJ Day.

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Wartime COs

Capt J. K. Gill	January 1, 1943
Capt E. C. Fry	April 1, 1943
Maj J. S. MacLaughlin (KIA)	July 17, 1943
Maj E. A. Wrenn	February 2, 1944
Maj E. S. Drew	January 1, 1945

Subsequent record
Deactivated on April 30, 1947

VMF-441 "Black Jacks"

GENEALOGY
Established at Tutuila, Samoa, on October 1, 1942
DEPLOYMENTS
Funafuti – March to September 1943 (F4F-4 and FM-1)
Nanomea – late September to December 1943 (F4F-4 and FM-1)
Tutuila – December 1943 (F4U-1)
Marshalls – February to March 1944 (F4U-1)
Okinawa – April to August 1945 (F4U-1C/D)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
49 victories, 2 aces
TOP SCORERS

Capt F. C. Kirkpatrick	5.5
2Lt S. E. McGinty	5
2Lt W. W. Eldridge	4

The "Black Jacks" were war babies. Birthed in Samoa in late 1942, they spent the entire war in the Pacific – perhaps a unique record among US Marine Corps fighter squadrons. The original CO was Maj Dan Torrey, who only remained in charge for two months before moving to a previously planned position. He was succeeded by Capt W. J. Meyer, who served for ten months. The squadron was formed in part from pilots of VMF-111, and it continued receiving F4F-3s into 1943. Newly arrived at Funafuti, in the Ellice Islands, the squadron made its first claims on March 27 when Capt Bill Boland Jr led an interception, downing one of four Japanese bombers and damaging another. On April 23 enemy bombers retaliated, destroying two B-24s and an F4F and damaging eight more Wildcats. Boland scored again, downing a G3M "Nell" on August 8. It was the last F4F kill made by a Marine.

The "Black Jacks" then proceeded to Nanomea in September, remaining there for three months until relieved by USAAF pursuits. On the night of November 10 two of Maj Jim Moore's Wildcats tried to intercept inbound Japanese bombers but no radar vector was available and the raiders got through, inflicting minor damage. From formation in late 1942 through 1943 the "Black Jacks" lost nine Wildcats and at least four pilots. At the end

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of November 1943 the squadron returned to Tutuila and began transition from F4F-4s and FM-1s to F4U-1s.

Subsequently, VMF-441's advance echelon flew to Roi, at Kwajalein Atoll, in February 1944 (the rest of the unit arrived in March) for 4th MAW operations against Wotje and Maloelap, where enemy aircraft were nonexistent. On August 21, 1944 the "Black Jacks" shifted to Majuro Atoll for raids against Mille and Jaluit, also without encountering airborne hostiles. However, in October VMF-441 began using drop tanks filled with napalm on concealed and fortified positions.

With the onset of the Okinawa campaign Maj Bob White led the squadron to Yontan on April 7, 1945. Casualties came fast, with four Corsairs and three pilots missing on the 10th. Then on April 16 the Corsairs defended USS *Laffey* (DD-724), claiming 16 kamikazes destroyed – four by 2Lt W. W. Eldridge. The combat also provided the first kills for Capt Floyd Kirkpatrick and 2Lt Selva McGinty, with three and two "Vals", respectively. However, the squadron lost four planes and one pilot that day.

On May 13 VMF-441 flew the first offensive mission from Okinawa, bombing and rocketing enemy airfields at Kikai Jima between Okinawa and Kyushu. Twelve days later Capt Kirkpatrick made ace, while 2Lt McGinty's fifth was a "Tony" on June 8. Shortly thereafter Maj Paul Johnston became the unit's final wartime CO. VMF-441's last two victories hit the water off Naha on the 22nd, for a career total of 49. The "Black Jacks" finished the war at Chimu. On September 7 Johnston led the unit into the large Japanese base at Yokosuka, thus making it one of the first US Marine Corps squadrons to operate in Japan proper.

In 20 months flying F4Us VMF-441 had lost 41 Corsairs and at least 12 aviators.

Wartime COs

Maj D. W. Torrey Jr	October 1, 1942
Capt W. J. Meyer	December 3, 1942
Maj J. B. Moore	October 1, 1943
Maj G. W. Metzger	April 5, 1944
Maj R. O. White	January 21, 1945
Maj P. T. Johnston	June 14, 1945

Subsequent record
Deactivated at Miramar on July 11, 1946

VMF-451 "Blue Devils"

GENEALOGY
Established at Mojave on February 15, 1944
DEPLOYMENTS
USS *Bunker Hill* (CV-17) – January to May 1945 (F4U-1D)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
34 victories, 1 ace

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TOP SCORERS	
Maj A. G. Donahue	5 (+9 with VMF-112)
Maj H. H. Long	4 (+3 with VMF-121 and +3 with VMF-122)
1Lt R. H. Swalley	3

VMF-451 was fortunate enough to have Maj Hank Ellis as its first CO. An old hand in US Marine Corps aviation, he had previously led VMF-214 for a month in the summer of 1943 and therefore brought operational experience to his new command. His exec, Herbert "Trigger" Long, was already an ace after service with VMF-121 and VMF-122 flying F4Fs and F4Us.

Alerted for carrier duty in December 1944, the "Blue Devils'" air echelon joined *Bunker Hill* at Alameda, California, in January while the ground echelon remained at Mojave. Ellis' VMF-451 teamed up with Maj Ed Roberts' VMF-221 in augmenting CVG-84, whose fighter squadron also flew Corsairs. Upon arrival at Ulithi Atoll in early February the Marines received refresher navigation training, as recent experience revealed a weakness in that vital skill. The initial operation was a major evolution – the Fast Carrier Force's first strikes against Tokyo. Almost one year to the day after establishment, Ellis led his pilots into leaden skies over the enemy homeland on February 16. Two pilots shared the squadron's first kill, an Aichi E13A "Jake" floatplane, and added a Zero the next day while losing three F4Us. The skipper returned with claims for three fighters damaged, which proved to be his only scores of the war.

From home waters the task force sailed south, supporting the Iwo Jima landings on the 19th. It was a landmark event – carrier-based leathernecks working with Marine riflemen.

The second line period began on March 14, and it saw carrier aircraft mainly operating against the enemy home islands. Airborne bandits and flak were plentiful, with eight planes and four pilots missing. On April 3 the squadron claimed 12 kills over Wan airfield on Kikai Island, three victories being credited to 1Lt Bill Peek. Four days later carrier-based Marine aviators got a look at an enemy fleet unit as TF 38 carrier air groups sank the 64,000-ton battleship *Yamato*, a light cruiser and four destroyers en route to Okinawa.

In April the "Blue Devils" lost seven F4Us and two pilots, but conversely the squadron's best day came on the 12th of that same month when it downed 16 planes west of Okinawa. Maj Archie Donahue claimed three "Vals" and two "Zekes" to become the US Marine Corps' only carrier-based ace in a day. Meanwhile, 1Lts George Petersen, Ray Swalley and John Webb each scored doubles. "Trigger" Long achieved double ace status with a "Val" on April 16. 1Lt John Norris ended the squadron's scoring string with a "Zeke" on May 11. That date also ended *Bunker Hill's* combat career after kamikazes knocked her out of the war with 389 dead or missing and 246 wounded. The US Marine Corps units lost 30 men combined. While aboard ship VMF-451 wrote off 30 Corsairs to all causes.

Upon returning to California the squadron set up shop at El Centro, where Archie Donahue assumed command in mid July. The "Blue Devils" ended their war there on VJ Day.

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Wartime COs

Maj H. A. Ellis Jr	February 15, 1944
Maj A. G. Donahue	July 18, 1945
1Lt. M. C. Allesandro	August 17, 1945

Subsequent record

Deactivated September 10, 1945 and reactivated as a Reserve squadron at Willow Grove on July 1, 1946. Recalled to active duty on March 1, 1951 and redesignated VMF(AW)-451 on July 1, 1961, unit became VMFA-451 on February 1, 1968. Deactivated on January 31, 1997, unit reactivated on April 1, 2010 and redesignated VMFAT-501 as F-35B Fleet Replacement Squadron at Eglin AFB, Florida

VMF-452 "Sky Raiders"

GENEALOGY
Established as VMF(CVS)-452 at Mojave on February 15, 1944
DEPLOYMENTS
USS *Franklin* (CV-13) – February-March 1945 (F4U-1D)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
4 victories
TOP SCORER
Maj J. R. Stack 2

The "Sky Raiders" had one of the shortest combat tours of any US Marine Corps squadron in World War II through no fault of their own. Maj Charles Weiland, a veteran of VMO-251 in the early days, led VMF-452 through its first 16 months, covering nearly all of the squadron's wartime service. The pilots began rocket firing and field carrier landings during the summer of 1944 and later trained with CAG-5, conducting CQs aboard *Ranger* in January 1945.

Assigned to *Franklin*, the "Sky Raiders" were teamed with the recycled VMF-214 to augment fleet air defense for CAG-5. "Big Ben" joined her task group on March 15, beginning an expected period of operations in enemy waters. Three days later the fast carriers attacked airfields and shipping on Kyushu, southernmost of the home islands. VMF-452 claimed four "Zekes" over the volcano in Kagoshima Bay, two falling to the exec, Maj John Stack. The next morning (19th), only 50 miles offshore, *Franklin* was caught in a relaxed security status when dive-bombers attacked out of the clouds. The result was catastrophic – the "Sky Raiders" lost 34 men among the some 800 killed. The carrier, severely damaged, proceeded to the East Coast, where she was fully restored but CVG-5's war ended on the second day of operations. Most of the Marines transferred to other ships bound for the West Coast, reaching home in April.

Weiland rolled out of VMF-452 in June, and the squadron remained at El Centro on VJ Day. Postwar, Weiland published two memoirs, *Manuscript Found in a Battle* (1993) and *Above and Beyond* (1997).

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Wartime COs

Maj C. P. Weiland	February 15, 1944
1Lt P. L. Schaefer	June 21, 1945
Maj E. S. Roberts	August 1, 1945

Subsequent record
Deactivated 1949

VMF-511

GENEALOGY
Established at MCAAF Oak Grove, North Carolina, on January 1, 1944 and redesignated VMF(CVS)-511 on October 28, 1944
DEPLOYMENTS
USS *Block Island* (CVE-106) – March to September 1945 (F4U-1D and F6F-5N)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
1 victory
TOP SCORER
1Lt B. J. Reuter 1

Two temporary commanding officers led VMF-511 before Maj Bob Maze assumed command nine days after establishment. Maze was from a notable naval family, his stepfather being then Rear Adm Arthur Radford, future chairman of the joint chiefs of staff.

VMF-511 was one of five MAG-51 squadrons intended for Project *Danny* – the naval portion of Operation *Crossbow*, aimed at destroying German V1 launch sites in France. By May 1944 Maze's unit had 25 Corsairs at Pollocksville, North Carolina, and in July it began tactical training at various Carolina air stations. But *Danny* was canceled and the squadron moved to Mojave in September.

Upon beginning CQs the squadron was redesignated VMF(CVS)-511 on October 28. Maze's unit was assigned to MCVG-1 in the second USS *Block Island* (CVE-106), the first having been sunk in the Atlantic in June 1944. The CAG was Lt Col John Dobbin of VMF-224 fame under Bob Galer.

During training off the California coast the Marines encountered deadly weather on February 14. Despite deteriorating conditions that canceled a gunnery flight, *Block Island's* Capt Massey Ferguson ordered two launches totaling 18 aircraft to bomb and strafe towed targets. When lowering ceilings closed in, a recall was issued too late. VMF-511 lost two Corsairs and their pilots trying to land ashore, while VMTB-233 wrote off five Avengers and most of their crews, including the squadron commander, Maj Bob Vaupell. Upon deployment in March the air group nominally consisted of eight F4U-1Ds, eight F6F-5Ns and two photo Hellcats, plus 18 TBM-3s. *Block Island* reached Ulithi in late April in time to support the Okinawa operation in May and June.

Skipper Bob Maze was killed by flak while attacking a boat anchorage at Ishigaki Shima on May 27. The exec, Capt Jim Secrest, assumed command. On June 16 the unit lost 1Lt R. H. Ploen when his Corsair was downed over Amami O Shima. *Block Island* then steamed to Leyte for replenishment, before joining two other CVEs in supporting the Australian

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invasion of Balikpapan, Borneo, in July. It was the last major amphibious operation of the war, conducted without loss to MCVG-1 aircrews. The squadron's only shootdown occurred when 1Lt B. J. Reuter bagged a "Jake" floatplane on the morning of July 3. With no further tasks ahead, *Block Island* sailed to Guam, where she learned of Japan's surrender. The ship celebrated with three volleys from the 40mm mounts and 21 rounds from the 5-incher.

Block Island spent the last half of the month at Leyte, then provided cover for minesweeping operations off the Korean coast. She battled a heavy typhoon off Formosa for three days bracketing the formal surrender ceremony in Tokyo Bay. The ship reached San Diego on December 11, bound for the East Coast and the unknown joys of a world at peace. The squadrons were offloaded, with VMF-511 going to Santa Barbara.

Wartime COs

Maj R. C. Maze (KIA)	January 10, 1944
Capt J. L. Secrest	May 27, 1945

Subsequent record
Deactivated at El Toro on March 10, 1946

VMF-512

GENEALOGY
Established at MCAAF Oak Grove on February 15, 1944
DEPLOYMENTS
USS *Gilbert Islands* (CVE-108) – March to September 1945 (FG-1D and F6F-5N)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
1 victory
TOP SCORER
Capt Thomas Liggett Jr 1

Another of the abortive Project *Danny* squadrons, VMF-512 was initially led by Maj E. V. Finn at Oak Grove upon its establishment in February 1944. He was replaced by Maj Blaine Baesler the following month, and the latter would command VMF-512 through to war's end. Eventually assigned to MCVG-2 (whose CAG, Lt Col William R. Campbell, had formerly served with VMO-251 on Guadalcanal) for escort carrier duty in the Pacific, the squadron was teamed up with VMTB-143. While at Santa Barbara undergoing further training, VMF-512 had at least two of its pilots detached from the unit and sent by Pan American clipper to Hawaii, where they requalified aboard carriers before being sent on to Guam. Joining three other carrier-qualified Marines, Lts Morris Hitson and Joe Janusewski rode a CVE to the fleet off Okinawa, then joined CVG-85 in USS *Shangri-La* (CV-38).

Gilbert Islands supported the Okinawa softening-up strikes in May. Capt Thomas Liggett splashed a "Dinah" on the 31st for the squadron's only victory. Next, *Gilbert Islands* attacked the Sakishima Retto in June before departing for replenishment at Leyte.

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While there the wandering Hitson and Janusewski and their three companions were able to return to the leatherneck fold, finishing their deployment under Campbell's command. Subsequently, the baby flattop steamed to Balikpapan to support the Australian landings in Borneo during July. For Operation *Oboe Gilbert Islands* was teamed with MCVG-1 aboard *Block Island* and a US Navy unit aboard USS *Suwannee* (CVE-27). VMF-512 was still aboard *Gilbert Islands* on VJ Day.

Wartime COs

Maj E. V. Finn	February 15, 1944
Maj B. H. Baesler	March 17, 1944

Subsequent record
Deactivated March 10, 1946

VMF-513

GENEALOGY
Established at MCAAF Oak Grove on February 15, 1944 and redesignated VMF(CVS)-513 on December 4, 1944
DEPLOYMENTS
USS *Vella Gulf* (CVE-111) – June to August 1945 (FG-1D and F6F-5N)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
No victories

After Project *Danny* was canceled, in September 1944 Maj Thomas O. Bales took VMF-513 from Oak Grove, North Carolina, to Walnut Ridge, Arkansas. In early December the squadron proceeded to Mojave, California, for carrier workups. Following a six-month training cycle, in early July 1945 Bales' crew sailed in *Vella Gulf* with MCVG-3 under Maj Royce Coln, formerly CO of VMSB-233 in the 1943 Solomons campaign. The squadron lost an aircraft on July 19 when 1Lt W. R. Winn's Corsair went down at Barbers Point, but he was safely recovered. *Vella Gulf* arrived at Saipan before month-end.

While in the Marianas MCVG-3 briefly flew strikes against Rota and Pagan. In August the ship got underway for Okinawa, spending only two days supporting the 3rd Marine Division before returning to Guam on VJ Day. Tom Bales remained the only skipper during the squadron's 19 months of wartime service.

Wartime CO

Maj T. O. Bales	February 15, 1944

Subsequent record
Redesignated VMF(AW)-513 in August 1950, redesignated VMFA-513 on August 1, 1963 and redesignated VMA-513 on April 16, 1971. Deactivated at Yuma on July 12, 2013

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VMF(N)-531 "Gray Ghosts"

GENEALOGY
Established at Cherry Point on November 16, 1942
DEPLOYMENTS
Solomons – September 1943 to August 1944 (PV-1N)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
12 victories, no aces
TOP SCORERS

Lt Col F. H. Schwable	4
Lt Col J. D. Harshberger	4
Capt D. R. Jenkins	2

The US Marine Corps' first nightfighter squadron was almost the only one commanded by a lieutenant colonel – in fact, two of them. In an unprecedented situation, Frank Schwable and John D. Harshberger alternated command during the squadron's first 18 months.

Suitable aircraft were delayed in arriving so VMF(N)-531 trained on export-model Brewster SB2A Buccaneers instead. The first radar controller was 1Lt W. D. Felder, who arrived in December, and about that time a cadre was sent to Britain to gain first-hand nightfighter knowledge. The nine officers and nine enlisted men studied RAF equipment and techniques to impart rare information to other personnel. Upon return, the Marines found the Buccaneers extremely troublesome, and at one point they were limited to daytime flying. But in January 1943 crews began checkouts on PV-1N Ventura armament and installation of the SCR-540 radar. Radar intercept training began in late February.

VMF(N)-531 was assigned to MAG-53, which also included VMF(N)-532 with F4Us. Early plans to equip entirely with PVs from April 1943 failed when deliveries trickled in through summer. Schwable's outfit went to El Centro for final training, then to Pearl Harbor with six Venturas.

Combat operations began from Banika, in the Russells, during September. Subsequently, the PVs moved to Vella Lavella and Bougainville, averaging three sorties per night. They also flew nocturnal strike and interdiction missions, often against Japanese barges. Pilots frequently shared credit for shootdowns with their gunners. Schwable's gunner, Sgt W. J. Fletcher, and Harshberger's SSgt W. E. Tiedman were both awarded half of each pilot's four victories. Capt D. R. Jenkins' crew scored first, splashing a "Betty" off Torokina Point before dawn on November 13, 1943. He also notched the squadron's second kill, an unidentified bogey on December 3. Harshberger and Schwable's crews then got on the board on December 6 and January 12, respectively.

February was by far the biggest month of the tour, with six kills – three for Schwable, two for Harshberger and one for 1Lt Jack Plunkett. Harshberger dropped his fourth, a floatplane, on March 14 and 1Lt M. E. Notestine closed VMF(N)-531's log on May 11. The last six victims were all "Jakes" or other floatplanes, which sometimes attacked US patrol craft. Therefore, the PVs often cooperated with PT boats, preventing harassment by enemy aircraft. The squadron history said that it lost six aircraft, none to enemy action. But an accounting of PV-1 BuNos shows seven losses just between February and April 1944.

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Upon departure the squadron received congratulatory messages from various commands. The following message, from Maj Gen Ralph J. Mitchell, commanding the 1st MAW, may speak for all:

"On the eve of your departure after ten months of continuous combat service in the SoPac area, I wish to express to each and every one of you a sincere and heartfelt 'well done.' You pioneered and developed true nightfighter tactics in this area. Your record of kills has been outstanding, and your contribution to the morale of both ground and surface forces has been immeasurable. We will miss you."

Upon returning to Cherry Point in August 1944 the squadron stood down, but it was revived in October as part of the 9th MAW. By June 1945 it had 19 F7Fs and 12 SBD-6s, later replaced by SB2C-4Es. That September the inventory was all F7F-3N Tigercats with improved radar, with a move to Eagle Mountain Lake, Texas. The "Gray Ghosts" ended the war here, but Maj Bob Keller had led a detachment of Tigercats to California, sailing for Okinawa on August 14. The det was designated VMF(N)-533 on this date, but hostilities ended the very next day.

Subsequently, the "Gray Ghosts" saw service in Peiping, patrolling northern China, but returned home in May 1947.

Wartime COs

Lt Col F. H. Schwable	November 16, 1942
Maj J. D. Harshberger	April 1, 1943
Lt Col F. H. Schwable	June 17, 1943
Lt Col J. D. Harshberger	February 18, 1944
Capt J. H. Wehmer	May 13, 1944
Lt Col R. C. West	October 13, 1944
Capt R. R. Finch	November 17, 1944
Maj A. N. Gordon	March 16, 1945
Maj R. P. Keller	April 10, 1945
Capt J. H. Wehmer	June 11, 1945

Subsequent record

Redesignated VMF(AW)-531 on October 14, 1948 and saw action in Korean War, the "Ghosts" leading all naval squadrons with ten confirmed kills while flying F4U-5N Corsairs, F7F-3N Tigercats and F3D Skynights. Redesignated VMFA-531 on August 8, 1963 and deactivated on March 27, 1992

VMF(N)-532

GENEALOGY

Established at Cherry Point on April 1, 1943

DEPLOYMENTS

Gilberts – January-February 1944 (F4U-2)

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Marshalls – February to June 1944 (F4U-2)
Marianas – July to October 1944 (F4U-2)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
2 victories
TOP SCORERS

Capt H. W. Bollman	1
1Lt E. A. Sovik	1

Upon establishing at Cherry Point in April 1943, VMF(N)-532, led by Maj Everette Vaughan, faced a demanding training cycle in order to get its F4U-2 Corsairs ready for combat. There was no wartime Christmas for VMF(N)-532, as Vaughan's unit arrived in San Diego on December 24 and headed for Ewa two days later. Arriving on Tarawa, in the Gilberts, on January 13, 1944, the Corsairs immediately began flying night combat air patrols. The squadron was much in demand, moving to Roi, in the Marshalls, via Makin on February 15. Thereafter, VMF(N)-532 shifted to Engebi.

Opportunities for engaging enemy aircraft were extremely rare. In fact, the squadron had only one night's shooting. Shortly after midnight on April 14 1Lt Joel Bonner was vectored onto a contact 30 miles south-southwest of Engebi. He got close enough to fire upon a "Betty", scoring visible hits before the bomber disappeared from sight. He was credited with a probable kill, but had to bail out of his shot-up Corsair. Another F4U was lost that same night with its pilot when 1Lt Don Spatz was given a mistaken vector that led into the expanse of the Pacific. Barely 30 minutes later 1Lt Ed Sovik and Capt Howard Bollman latched onto a pair of Mitsubishi bombers due west of the base. Both were splashed, providing the US Marine Corps with its only night kills in the Central Pacific.

Vaughan's Corsairs remained at Engebi until June 11, then flew back to Roi. Lacking aerial targets, the nightfighters began nocturnal attacks upon Wotje. Shifting to Saipan in July, VMF(N)-532 later capped the southern Marianas and Guam. Vaughan rolled out in September, having commanded for 16 months. Capt John Colby led the squadron back to Miramar in late October 1944. Its Pacific combat tour had cost eight aircraft between February and September.

In early December the unit moved to Eagle Mountain Lake for training until war's end.

Wartime COs

Capt R. S. Mickey	April 1, 1943
Maj E. H. Vaughan	May 24, 1943
Capt W. S. Adams II	September 24, 1944
Capt J. B. Colby	November 15, 1944
Capt N. Bedell	January 5, 1945
Maj J. C. Scott	May 7, 1945

Subsequent record

Deactivated on May 31, 1947

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VMF(N)-533 "Black Mac's Killers"

GENEALOGY
Established at Cherry Point on October 10, 1943
DEPLOYMENTS
Gilbert-Marshalls – May 1944 to April 1945 (F6F-3N)
Okinawa – May to August(?) 1945 (F6F-5N)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
35 victories, 1 ace
TOP SCORERS

Capt R. Baird	6
1Lt A.F. Dellamano	3
1Lt R. M. Hemstad	3

Maj Marion Magruder was a product of the small prewar US Marine Corps fighter community. Winged in 1938, his colleagues included John L. Smith and Marion Carl. In early 1943 he was among the Marine aviators sent to Britain to fly with RAF nightfighter squadrons, and upon his return Magruder began a long career at the pinnacle of US Marine Corps nocturnal aviation.

He established VMF(N)-533 at Cherry Point that October, flying F6F-3Es. Six months later "Black Mac's Killers" went to the Pacific, arriving at Eniwetok Atoll in May 1944. Upon relieving the Corsairs of VMF(N)-532 the Hellcats assumed Night CAP responsibility for the area, moving to Engebi at the end of November.

The squadron served an extraordinarily lengthy apprenticeship, flying in the Central Pacific for 12 months before reaching combat. But on short notice "Mac's Killers" flew up to Okinawa – more than 1,000 miles over water in single-engined aircraft. VMF(N)-533 landed at Yontan on May 14, pending arrival of the ground echelon. Magruder's F6F-5Ns were kept extremely busy, providing airborne patrols in hours of darkness. The "Killers" lived up to their name almost immediately, 1Lts Al Branham and Bob Wilhide scoring a probable and a confirmed, respectively, in the early morning hours of May 16. 1Lt Bob Wellwood took an early lead, downing three intruders during the night of the 18th while Ed Le Faivre splashed two.

On the night of the 24th the squadron added five more, with 1Lt Al Dellamano also scoring a rare triple. That was the night of the *Giretsu* airborne commando raid on Yontan, and a VMF(N)-533 officer, 1Lt Maynard Kelly, was fatally wounded by friendly fire. By month-end the Hellcats had scored 16 kills in two weeks. The full squadron was reunited in June, settling with the ground echelon on Ie Shima.

Despite continuing bad weather, June was equally busy, with VMF(N)-533 logging 15 more victories. Capt Bob Baird became the only Marine night ace, although Bruce Porter and Wally Sigler of VMF(N)-542 scored their fifth victories in Hellcats. Magruder downed a "Betty" on the 22nd – the same night that Baird made ace.

The squadron lost just one aircraft during its Okinawa tour and no pilots to enemy action. On May 17 Bob Wilhide was killed by undisciplined shipboard gunfire, prompting Magruder to seek an audience with the commander of the amphibious force offshore. There, he proceeded to reprimand Vice Adm Richmond Kelly Turner, who pledged there would be no repeat offenses. Tragically, Wilhide's younger brother Wilfred of VMF-311 died in an F4U the next month.

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In early June another VMF(N)-533 Hellcat was transferred out with heavy damage after 1Lt Ralyan Parkhill was wounded by trigger-happy Corsair pilots in a twilight incident. However, the intended victim recovered to splash a "Rufe" floatplane on the 26th. In early July Magruder turned over to Maj Sam Folsom. "Mac" had led VMF(N)-533 for the first 21 months of its life – a record for nightfighter skippers. Meanwhile, the "Killers" added five more victories through month's end for a total of 35. Twenty-one pilots scored, including eight with multiple victories.

The squadron finished the war at Ie Shima with VMF-223 veteran Bob Keller at the helm. Upon receiving some F7Fs, VMF(N)-533 saw brief postwar service during a tour in China.

The "Killers'" tally of 35 victories rated them not only top among Pacific Theater land-based nightfighter units, but seventh of the 22 TAF fighter squadrons at Okinawa, and an impressive 20th among all US Marine Corps squadrons during the war – all while losing one aircraft and a pilot to friendly fire, plus an officer on the ground. Additionally, VMF(N)-533 probably established the best wartime safety record of any US Marine Corps fighter squadron in combat – nearly 11,000 flight hours with few accidents and no pilots lost to operational causes or enemy action.

Wartime COs

Maj M. M. Magruder	October 10, 1943
Maj S. B. Folsom Jr	July 8, 1945
Maj R. P. Keller	August 17, 1945

Subsequent record

Redesignated VMF-533 in May 1953, redesignated VMA(AW)-533 in December 1956, redesignated VMA-533 in Auguist 1959, redesignated VMA(AW)-533 on July 1, 1965 and redesignated VMFA-533(AW) in September 1992. Unit currently flies F/A-18D Hornets from MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina

VMF(N)-534

GENEALOGY
Established at Cherry Point on October 1, 1943
DEPLOYMENTS
Marianas, Gilberts – August 1944 to September 1945 (F6F-3N)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
1 victory
TOP SCORER
1Lt B. E. Roueche 1

Upon establishment at Cherry Point in October 1943, VMF(N)-534 remained under the command of Maj Pete Lambrecht for four-and-a-half months. When he rolled out to establish VMF(N)-541, Maj Ross Mickey completed the training cycle, taking the

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squadron to San Diego in April 1944. Mickey was exceptionally experienced, having flown Venturas with VMF(N)-531 and Corsairs with VMF(N)-532 in Stateside training – he had actually been the first CO of the latter unit.

Mickey's Marines embarked in USS *Breton* (CVE-23) that month, arriving at Espiritu Santo in early May. After alighting at Guam four weeks later, the squadron logged its first "night cap" on August 7, 1944. It began a long, dry spell. Finally, on February 20, 1945 1Lt Brett Roueche downed a C6N "Myrt" reconnaissance plane west of Saipan for the squadron's only victory. In May 1945 part of VMF(N)-534 moved to Kobler Field, Saipan, and another section went to Eniwetok for Gilbert-Marshalls operations. Various detachments flew from Guam, Saipan and Eniwetok until war's end. The squadron lost at least four Hellcats between November 1944 and May 1945.

Ross Mickey's 15-month tenure as CO encompassed most of the squadron's combat, and he was relieved by Maj Jim Maguire in May. Clair Chamberlain took the conn in late June. Mickey remained in nightfighters postwar, commanding VMF(N)-513's jet F3D Skyknights in Korea.

Wartime COs

Maj P. D. Lambrecht	October 1, 1943
Maj R. S. Mickey	February 15, 1944
Maj J. B. Maguire Jr	May 24, 1945
Maj C. C. Chamberlain	June 21, 1945

Subsequent record
Deactivated on May 31, 1947

VMF(N)-541 "Bat Eyes"

GENEALOGY
Estabished at Cherry Point on February 15, 1944
DEPLOYMENTS
Peleliu – September to November 1944 (F6F-5N?)
Philippines – December 1944 to January 1945 (F6F-5N)
Peleliu – January to August 1945 (F6F-5N)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
23 victories, no aces
TOP SCORERS

TSgt J. W. Andre	4
2Lt H. T. Hayes Jr	4
Capt H. J. Morrison	2
Capt D. W. Thomson	2

Maj Pete Lambrecht, previously of VMF(N)-534, stood up the "Bat Eyes" and retained command until just before war's end. He was another of the cadre of US

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Marine Corps officers who learned the nightfighter's trade in Britain. Like so many previous Marine squadrons, the "Bat Eyes" boarded the first escort carrier *Long Island* in early August 1944. Three weeks later they arrived at Emirau, proceeding to Peleliu the next month.

Although newly conquered, Peleliu was a backwater, with pilots mainly flying "barge sweeps." Lambrecht's crew adjusted to Peleliu as best as possible, establishing a mess hall and officers' club. The squadron was unusual in having two enlisted pilots, TSgts John Andre and Frank Ratchford.

On October 31 Maj Norm Mitchell splashed an E13A "Jake" floatplane, which proved to be the "Bat Eyes'" only kill in the Palaus. Nevertheless, during October and November VMF(N)-541 lost three Hellcats at Peleliu, with all pilots safe.

The Philippines campaign was well underway on December 3 when the "Bat Eyes" moved to Tacloban airfield on Leyte. Gen Douglas MacArthur wanted more nightfighter protection than the available P-61 Black Widows could provide, hence the unusual request for US Marine Corps assets. The squadron's first missions from Tacloban saw pilots capping PT boats in Surigao Strait on the night of December 4. The "Bat Eyes" quickly got down to business as 2Lt Rod Montgomery downed an "Oscar" in the predawn hours of the 5th.

On the morning of December 12 a three-plane mission led by Capt Dave Thomson was directed onto Japanese formations west of Leyte that were intending to attack a convoy. A full division under 1Lt Fletcher Miller joined Thomson's trio, combining for 12 kills from a reported 33 bandits. The total bag included four bombers, a "Val" and seven fighters, as Capt Dave Thomson and 1Lt Harold Hayes each claimed two kills. Three days later, west of the Negros Islands, the "Bat Eyes" downed four more planes in 35 minutes. Then on the 22nd John Andre ran his tally to four with a pair of "Jacks". His record was matched when Harold Hayes made the last two kills on January 3, 1945.

During its time protecting the US Army, VMF(N)-541 had downed 22 bandits, losing one aircraft each in December and January. Ironically, all but four of the unit's victories had been scored in daylight.

Back in the Palaus, on January 11 the "Bat Eyes" lost three planes and 2Lt Harold Hayes who had four kills from the Philippine deployment.

After training in night dive-bombing, the squadron moved to Falalop, in Ulithi Atoll, at the end of May, relieving VMF(N)-542. Upon hearing of the happy hunting over Okinawa, the "Bat Eyes" gloomed in the Pacific backwater. They raised their morale somewhat by applying nose art to their Hellcats that summer. Now under Maj Reynolds Moody, VMF(N)-541 provided a detachment to Ulithi until late August. After Japan's surrender the Hellcats flew to north China, operating from Petzino airfield. They patrolled the frontier until sent home after Christmas 1945.

John Andre subsequently became the last US Marine Corps ace when he shot down a Communist aircraft over Korea in 1952.

The "Bat Eyes" were probably the only US Marine Corps squadron to receive the Army Distinguished Unit Citation.

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Wartime COs

Lt Col P. D. Lambrecht	February 15, 1944
Maj N. L. Mitchell	June 21, 1945
Maj R. A. Moody	July 8, 1945

Subsequent record
Deactivated on April 30, 1946

VMF(N)-542

GENEALOGY
Established at Cherry Point on March 6, 1944
DEPLOYMENTS
Ulithi – October 1944 to March 1945 (F6F-5N)
Okinawa – April to August 1945 (F6F-5N)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
18 victories, no aces
TOP SCORERS

2Lt G. L. Coles	2.5
Maj R. B. Porter	2 (+3 with VMF-121)
2Lt D. W. Carlton	2

Maj Bill Kellum was the first and last CO of VMF(N)-542 – perhaps a unique record in US Marine Corps aviation. He took the squadron through training, then to Ulithi when ground and flight echelons were rejoined. Subsequently, Kellum led the advance echelon to Leyte in February 1945 and into combat over Okinawa. First based at Yontan from early April, under MAG-31, the squadron moved to Chimu in July.

2Lts A. J. Arceneau and W. W. Campbell scored the unit's first victories on April 16, although Campbell went missing 30 days later. The squadron downed nine more raiders before Kellum was relieved by Solomons veteran Bruce Porter in late May. The new skipper scored a rare double kill the night of June 15, first splashing a "Nick" twin-engine fighter followed by a "Betty" possibly carrying an Ohka suicide plane. It made him one of only two Marine aces (with Wally Sigler) claiming victories in Corsairs and Hellcats. Porter's fighter control station on the mission was "Handyman," with future Los Angeles radio personality Capt Bill Balance on the scope.

Five days earlier 1Lt Fred Hilliard splashed an unidentified hostile and then disappeared, possibly after a collision.

With 18 victories, VMF(N)-542 ranked second among the four US Marine Corps and one USAAF nightfighter squadrons of Okinawa's TAF. On the morning of August 8 2Lt Bill Jennings downed a "Tony" 110 miles offshore. This proved to be not only the last nightfighter victory but also the last Marine aerial kill of World War II.

The squadron lost four Night Hellcats at Okinawa with three pilots missing. Porter rolled out on September 1 (the day before Japan's formal surrender) when Kellum returned

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to the squadron. VMF(N)-542 was flying from Yontan on VJ Day, and it served briefly in Japan prior to returning to ConUS in the new year.

Wartime COs

Maj W. C. Kellum	March 6, 1944
Maj R. B. Porter	May 23, 1945
Maj W. C. Kellum	September 1, 1945

Subsequent record

Redesignated VMF(AW)-542 in 1948, redesignated VMFA-542 on November 2, 1963 and deactivated on June 30, 1970. Reactivated as VMA-542 at Beaufort on January 12, 1972, the unit currently flies AV-8B Harrier IIs from MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina

VMF(N)-543 "Night Hawks"

GENEALOGY
Established at Cherry Point on April 15, 1944
DEPLOYMENTS
Okinawa – April to August 1945 (F6F-5N)
AERIAL COMBAT RECORD
15 victories, no aces
TOP SCORERS

Capt J.A. Etheridge	2
2Lt T. H. Danaher	2

The "Night Hawks'" commissioning skipper, Maj Claude Carlson, was an old timer – he had served in Shanghai in 1939 and commanded VMSB-141 in 1942-43. However, he died in a flying accident at Cherry Point in July 1944, being succeeded by his exec, Maj Claire Chamberlain. "CC" took the squadron to El Centro in September, preparing for departure for Hawaii in January 1945. The squadron's Hellcats landed at Okinawa in April, and five enlisted men were injured when a kamikaze struck the transport USS *Achenar* (AKA-53) on the 2nd. The ground and flight echelons were reunited at Kadena on April 9, serving in MAG-33.

The "Night Hawks" began night CAPs on April 14, losing 2Lt Bruce Bonmer. Two more planes and a pilot were lost on the 17th – only the unit's fourth night of operations. First blood had come on April 15 when Capt Jim Etheridge shortstopped a "Frank" fighter directly overhead as it descended to attack Kadena. He ignored heavy "friendly fire" to down the intruder, but took six hits in the process. It was the first night kill of the TAF on Okinawa. However, American AA gunners shot up another Night Hellcat so badly that it was surveyed.

After nearly a year in command, Claire Chamberlain turned over to Maj Jim Maguire in mid June.

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The squadron's best night's work was July 29 with two "Bettys" confirmed and a probable. The "Night Hawks" closed their victory log on August 7 with two more "Bettys" destroyed, one in the early morning by 2Lt Henry Berck and the last one by Capt Tom Danaher just before midnight. The "Night Hawks" were credited with 15 kills, and as proof of the validity of their training, eight of the 13 successful pilots were second lieutenants.

The squadron took heavy casualties during the Okinawa campaign, suffering 11 of the 17 TAF nightfighters known lost during the campaign, including a USAAF P-61 Black Widow. The "Night Hawks" moved to Awase airfield on July 15 but were based at Kadena on VJ Day. They returned to Miramar in January 1946.

Wartime COs

Maj C. J. Carlson Jr (KIFA)	April 15, 1944
Maj C. C. Chamberlain	July 3, 1944
Maj J. B. Maguire Jr	June 18, 1945

Subsequent record

Deactivated April 11, 1946, reactivated at Glenview on May 1, 1951 as VMF-543 within the Reserve. Redesignated VMA-543, the unit was deactivated at Glenview on May 1, 1974

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BIOGRAPHIES

The following brief biographies highlight the careers of all US Marine Corps double aces and fighter pilot Medal of Honor recipients, plus a few otherwise notable aviators – 31 in all. Ranks are the highest attained in combat during World War II, with highest rank attained postwar noted in the text. The figures after each name indicate aerial victories credited as destroyed, probably destroyed and damaged from World War II. However, in some instances the originating documents credit a "smoker" as destroyed rather than a probable or damaged.

Capt Donald N. Aldrich (20-6-0)

Born – Moline, Illinois, October 24, 1917
Died – Chicago, Illinois, May 3, 1947, aged 29

If Don Aldrich was not born to fly, he certainly grew up flying. His father, a mechanical engineer, owned a Waco biplane and introduced him to the cockpit at an early age. Contemporary reports state that Don had flown 100 hours by the age of 12 in 1929.

When the elder Aldrich died in 1933 the family was forced to sell the airplane, but Don's enthusiasm remained undimmed. While attending Armour Institute of Technology in Chicago he worked part time to fund lessons in Piper Cubs, adding another 70 hours.

Eager to become a military pilot, Aldrich quit school after two years and applied for the Army Air Corps. He was declined because he was married, so he immediately applied for the RCAF and was winged in November 1941 after nine months of training. Retained as an instructor, Aldrich chafed for combat and transferred to the US Marine Corps in late 1942. With his prior service he received a captaincy in June 1943 and joined VMF-215. In three combat tours over six months Aldrich fought more than 12 engagements. In the squadron's first six-week tour he became an ace in four combats during August-September 1943. His first success came near Ballale with a confirmed "Zeke" and a probable on August 12. He was lightly wounded on the 21st, but repeated the sequence four days later. He logged victories four and five, again over Ballale, on September 2.

Aldrich scored no kills during his second frontline tour but he hit his stride in the third. One of the competitive aces in VMF-215, he was credited with 15 victories in less

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than four weeks. Aldrich was wounded again on his best day, January 28, 1944, but not before he had downed four "Zekes" off Tobera, running his string to 17. He brought his shot up Corsair back to base, where it was written off after being deemed too damaged to repair. On February 9 Aldrich claimed a "Tojo", again south of Tobera. This success made him the fourth, and last, Marine to be credited with 20 victories. Aldrich also claimed six probable kills – the US Marine Corps record. The only other "probable ace" was Maj Wilbur Free of VMF-212, credited with 3.5 destroyed and 5 probables.

At the end of the squadron's tour Aldrich held the Navy Cross, the Distinguised Flying Cross (DFC) and Air Medal. His Navy Cross citation lauded him for actions between January 5 and February 15, 1944, most notably engagements on January 20, 26 and 28 that resulted in him being credited with eight victories.

Aldrich remained in the US Marine Corps postwar, continuing to fly fighters, and by early 1947 he had nearly 2,400 hours total time. On May 3 he was killed in a forced landing at Ashburn Airport near Chicago. He did not know that the runway was closed due to mud, and his F4U-4 crashed inverted when its wheels touched the ground. He was 29 years old, leaving his widow Marjorie and son Frederick.

TSgt John W. Andre (4-0-0)

Born – Colbert County, Alabama, December 11, 1919
Died – Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, July 7, 1982, aged 64

The prewar US Marine Corps had dozens of noncommissioned aviators, including standouts such as Ken Walsh. John Andre numbered in that company.

In 1940, after attending the University of Alabama as a Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) cadet, the 21-year-old Andre dropped out to enlist in the US Marine Corps. After service as an aviation mechanic at Quantico he applied for flight training and was accepted in March 1942, receiving his wings in November 1943. Upon completing nightfighter training Sgt Andre joined VMF(N)-541, which went to the Pacific in early 1944. As a technical sergeant he found several opportunities to engage enemy aircraft in the Philippines during December 1944. He splashed a twin-engined bandit over Ormoc Bay on December 7 and a "Zeke" off Leyte's west coast five days later. Finally, he downed two Mitsubishi J2M "Jacks" over Luzon on the 22nd, finishing as one of the squadron's two leading scorers.

Andre left active duty in 1946 but obtained a reserve commission as a second lieutenant. Still rated in nightfighters, he was recalled to active duty in 1950, going to Korea with VMF(N)-513 in November 1951. Flying an F4U-5N on a nocturnal interdiction mission over North Korea on June 7, 1952, 1Lt Andre was attacked by a Yak-9 of the North Korean Peoples' Air Force. He outmaneuvered the communist pilot and shot him down in flames, becoming the last piston-engined ace in US Marine Corps history. Upon returning to the US Andre served in attack and nightfighter squadrons, as well as administrative positions, rising to the rank of major. In 1959 he accepted a warrant officer's commission and retired in 1966. Andre retired in Tennessee, where he died in 1982.

For his service in two wars Andre received four DFCs and seven Air Medals.

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Capt Robert Baird (6-0-0)

Born – Los Angeles, California, November 13, 1921
Died – Sonoma, California, July 7, 1992, aged 71

The US Marine Corps' only nightfighter ace entered the Naval Aviation Cadet program in July 1942 and completed flight training in March 1943. He was commissioned a second lieutenant at the age of 21 and began fighter operational training. Bob Baird grew up in the nightfighting world, having paid his dues long before he reached the top of the VMF(N) pinnacle. He never saw a bandit during his long Central Pacific tour flying F4U-2s in VMF(N)-532.

When the unit returned home it began preparing to transition to the spectacular new F7F Tigercat. However, newer squadrons required experienced aviators, and six months later Baird joined Maj "Mac" Magruder's VMF(N)-533. Promoted captain in July 1944, Baird was among "Black Mac's" senior aviators. Again he endured another lengthy backwater tenure as VMF(N)-533 served in the Marshalls for a full year before deploying forward to Okinawa.

Flying from Yontan, Magruder's pilots began carving a reputation for themselves, downing 30 planes in six weeks during May-June 1945. Baird's chance came late, but he made the most of his opportunities, adding his name to the successful pilots' roster with a "Jake" floatplane on the night of June 9. He quickly assumed the lead with a double on the 16th, identified as a "Betty" and a "Nell". Six nights later, on the 22nd, Baird splashed his fourth and fifth victims, a "Frances" and a "Betty". However, he was frustrated by repeated failures of the 20mm cannon in his "personal" Hellcat, forcing him to rely on the .50in. guns instead. Eventually, the VMF(N)-533 "ordies" got the cannon working for him when he downed his sixth plane, a "Betty", before dawn on July 14.

By war's end Baird wore the Navy Cross, Silver Star, DFC and seven Air Medals. Upon returning to ConUS he remained in nightfighters, serving in VMF(N)-542 and VMF(N)-532 at Cherry Point until 1947. During the Korean War Baird flew F7F-3Ns in 1950-51, undertaking nocturnal interdiction sorties with VMF(N)-542 and VMF(N)-513.

Following staff assignments Maj Baird served in conventional daylight fighter squadrons in the US and Japan through the 1950s. In his 29-year career he flew with seven fighter squadrons, including four night-flying units. Baird endured a four-year Pentagon tour between 1961 and 1965 and then went to Vietnam, where he was on the staff of the 1st MAW in 1967-68. Flying occasional missions in-theater, he complained, "Mainly I flew a desk." He retired out of Quantico, Virginia, in July 1971.

Bob Baird was elected to the board of the American Fighter Aces Association in 1991 but died the following year of spinal meningitis. He was buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

Lt Col Harold W. Bauer (11-1-0)

Born – Woodruff, Kansas, November 20, 1908
Died – Guadalcanal, November 14, 1942, aged 33

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Although born in Kansas, Bauer received an appointment to the Naval Academy from Nebraska and graduated ranking 60th of 402 in the class of 1930. His classmates included famed aviator Rear Adm "Jumpin' Joe" Clifton, Lt Cdr Lance Massey, who died leading Torpedo Squadron Three at Midway, and Cdr Dudley "Mush" Morton, who perished in command of the submarine USS *Wahoo* (SS-238) in 1943.

Bauer applied for flight training and earned his Naval Aviator designation in February 1936. Assigned to VO-7M, he became engineering and materiel officer upon promotion to captain. It was a plum assignment, leading to his appointment as squadron flight (operations) officer.

In April 1940 Bauer joined VF-1M, but lateraled to VF-2M three months later. Eventually the squadron was redesignated VMF-211, which flew to glory at Wake Island.

In the tight community of prewar US Marine Corps aviation, Joe Bauer was widely regarded as perhaps the Corps' finest aviator. A year before Pearl Harbor there were only 425 leatherneck pilots, and the fighter community was even smaller. Bauer was known as "Indian Joe" for his dark complexion, but more widely he was called "The Coach" due to his inspirational leadership. Recalled Marion Carl, "I came to admire Joe as perhaps the finest pilot and officer I ever knew."

Bauer became exec of VMF-221 in July 1941, rising to major on January 1, 1942. He became CO in February, then established VMF-212 in March. Advancement came quickly in wartime, Bauer making lieutenant colonel on August 7 – the day of the Guadalcanal landings. By month-end he had logged more than 1,800 hours.

Based at Vila, on Efate, well in the backwater of the war, Bauer chafed for combat. He cadged two short trips to "Cactus", flying "guest appearance" missions with Bob Galer's VMF-224 and John L. Smith's VMF-223 and scoring on both occasions. His first kill was logged on August 28 – a "Betty" during one day ashore on Guadalcanal. His next trip lasted a week, and "The Coach" showed how it was done. He narrowly missed becoming an ace in a day on October 3, with claims for four Zeroes destroyed and one probable. In honor of the latter performance, Brig Gen Roy Geiger, commander of the "Cactus Air Force", presented Bauer with a Japanese battle flag.

On October 16 Bauer led much of VMF-212 into "Cactus", arriving low on fuel after a five-hour flight. As the fighters reached Guadalcanal a Japanese dive-bombing attack began against the destroyer USS *McFarland* (DD-237). The skipper tied into the Aichis, gunning four north of Lunga Point. The next day Bauer's seniority caught up with him – he was appointed Guadalcanal fighter commander, running operations from headquarters at Henderson Field. However, he continued flying as time and his duties permitted.

Almost a month later, on November 14, Bauer led one of the day's many fighter missions covering strikes against the Japanese reinforcement convoy. Late that afternoon he claimed two Zeroes in a dogfight near Savo Island, then was shot down and bailed out. Squadronmates saw him in the water and raced for home to bring help. Joe Foss and Maj Joe Renner jumped in a J2F amphibian, hoping to find their friend, but it was too late. "The Coach" died six days before his 34th birthday. Joe Bauer received a posthumous Medal of Honor, and the Vila airfield was named in his honor.

Bauer's son Bill also became a Marine aviator and test pilot, retiring as a colonel.

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Capt John F. Bolt Jr (6-0-0)

Born – Laurens, South Carolina, May 19, 1921
Died – New Smyrna Beach, Florida, September 8, 2004, aged 83

Jack Bolt was the only Marine who became an ace in two wars – just one of seven Americans to win the distinction.

He joined the US Marine Corps Reserve to help pay for college, and entered aviation cadet training at Pensacola in 1941. Upon commissioning in July 1942 he served as a "plowback" flight instructor before going to the Pacific. There he joined the reformed VMF-214 under Greg Boyington. At the time he had 660 hours total flight time.

Bolt impressed his squadronmates with his attention to detail. He tested different types of .50in. ammunition on crashed Japanese aircraft to determine the optimum loadout, and it worked. Bolt relished combat. He compared dogfighting to duck hunting, "except the ducks shoot back." In 94 Solomons missions he downed six Japanese aircraft in four combats, beginning with two "Zekes" on September 23, 1943. Bolt added another "Zeke" on October 17, two on December 23 and a sixth, and final, example on January 4, 1944. He ended his combat tour with two DFCs.

Bolt briefly returned to the Pacific with VMF-472 aboard the escort carrier *Block Island* in the summer of 1945, arriving in theatre too late to see any action.

Among his postwar accomplishments, Bolt demonstrated the Corsair's exceptional endurance with a 14-hour flight. In 1952 Maj Bolt entered his second war, flying nearly 100 missions in Grumman F9F Panthers with VMF-115. Displaying the same analytical approach he showed in VMF-214, he analyzed battle damage to squadron aircraft and developed an improved dive-bombing technique.

Whilst still in Korea Bolt was accepted into the USAF exchange program, filling one of the "leatherneck seats" in the designated F-86 unit, the 51st Fighter Wing, in 1953. Now 32, he was an accomplished professional, and made an impression on his "blue suit" colleagues. Flying a Sabre named *Darling Dottie* (for his wife of eight years) he downed six MiG-15s and damaged two between May and July. Among his friends in the 39th Fighter Squadron was Capt Joseph McConnell, America's leading jet ace. Although flying with the USAF, Bolt received the Navy Cross for his mission of July 11, 1953 – the day he became a Sabre ace.

After Korea Bolt served in staff and planning positions, subsequently commanding the "Black Sheep" for nearly two years. Flying North American FJ-4 Furies, he led the first in-flight refueling mission by a single-engined aircraft from Hawaii to Japan. Once back Stateside, Bolt took a bachelor's degree from the University of Maryland in 1956. Upon retiring from the US Marine Corps in 1962 he was occupied in the business world until 1967. He then entered the University of Florida law school, graduating in the same class as his son in 1969. Bolt taught law and remained an active attorney for 20 years.

In all, Bolt received a Navy Cross, two DFCs and two Air Medals.

Maj Gregory Boyington (22-4-0)

Born – Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, December 4, 1912
Died – Fresno, California, January 11, 1988, aged 75

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By far the best-known Marine ever to wear wings of gold, Gregory Boyington epitomized the colorful, brawling image of a flying leatherneck. The reality of his life is far less cinematic, and more complex.

The rambunctious youngster grew up in northern Idaho, believing his name was Gregory Hallenbeck. Only upon applying for Naval Aviation did he learn that he was adopted, and his biological father was named Boyington. At the University of Washington (alma mater of Bob Galer and Bill Marontate) Boyington majored in engineering and won a regional wrestling title. He graduated in 1934 with a US Army Reserve commission in the coastal artillery, and also worked at Boeing. In early 1936 Boyington was accepted as an aviation cadet in the US Marine Corps Reserve. His marital status would have disqualified him, but he had married under his adoptive name. He graduated from Pensacola in March 1937, receiving a regular commission later that year.

Although later famous as "Pappy", Boyington was known to his prewar contemporaries as "Rats" for his resemblance to actor Gregory Ratoff. Boyington completed the Basic School for Marine junior officers in 1938 and then reported to San Diego, where he flew F3F biplane fighters. Subsequently, he returned to Pensacola as an instructor, gaining a worsening reputation for drinking and fighting.

In August 1941 Boyington was recruited into the American Volunteer Group, as the pay and combat bonus offered a means of settling accumulating debts. Of 99 AVG pilots, Boyington was the only one with a regular commission. Senior officers considered him far more trouble to the Marine Corps than he was worth, and upon granting the resignation Brig Gen Ralph J. Mitchell, Director of US Marine Corps Aviation, stipulated that Boyington was not to be allowed back. Based on his fighter experience, Boyington became a flight leader in the "Flying Tiger's" First Squadron. He was credited with two aerial victories over Burma in February 1942, but was irritated at not receiving payment for other claims. Dejected, he returned to the US in April, eventually receiving a dishonorable discharge from the AVG.

Boyington's 1941 resignation had barred him from returning to the Corps, but in mid 1942 the need for experienced officers was greater than ever. Thus, after working at menial jobs and undeterred by inconvenient facts, he bluffed his way back into the US Marine Corps. He not only claimed to have commanded an AVG squadron but insisted on six aerial victories, whereas "Flying Tiger" records confirm two aerial kills and three-plus strafing victories. Not bothering to confirm a troublesome alcoholic's claims with the AVG, Headquarters US Marine Corps accepted Boyington's assertions without documentation. It duly reinstated him as a first lieutenant in September 1942, and he had risen to the rank of major by year-end. He was sent to the Pacific as a prospective squadron commander, taking over VMF-122 between April and June 1943. He broke an ankle in a brawl (later Marine versions said it was a football game), then led VMF-112 in July and August.

Boyington's third command was his last, and it was the one that defined the rest of his life. In early September he took over VMF-214, which was reforming between combat deployments. His later characterization of the pool pilots as "goof offs" did ill credit to the aviators or the facts. About a third of them had combat experience, and

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they ranged in age from 21 to 31. Thirty years old himself, the CO was dubbed "Gramps" and then "Pappy."

Whatever his personal problems, Boyington performed in the air. On the reformed squadron's first mission – a bomber escort on September 16 – he claimed five kills and his pilots six more against one loss. The "Black Sheep" legend was launched. An ace at 30 years and 9 months, Boyington was older than all but three US Marine Corps aces in World War II – William Carlton (37), Joe Bauer (33) and "Fritz" Payne (31).

At year-end Boyington was growing irritable as the squadron approached the completion of its tour. He badly wanted to be the US Marine Corps' top ace, and his elevated AVG claims put him within striking distance of Joe Foss. In his book Boyington said that Marion Carl offered to give up the lead of a Rabaul fighter sweep on January 3, 1944. However, Carl said that "Rats" requested the exchange, which seems more likely. Although Carl was himself highly competitive as an ace – he had just run his score to 18.5 – he reckoned he still had ample time left in combat. In fact, the exchange occurred before the January 3 mission.

When Boyington was shot down and captured on January 3, he was thought to have tied Foss' record on the basis of one Zero victory witnessed by members of his flight immediately prior to his demise. Upon release in 1945 he claimed two more kills, and again Headquarters accepted the statement despite a lack of witnesses. On that basis he was proclaimed the "top Marine ace," although credited with four fewer victories than Foss in US Marine Corps service. The Corps remains steadfastly and bureaucratically unwilling to correct the record.

Due to Boyington's seniority and status, the Japanese did not announce him as a PoW. Thus, his Medal of Honor was issued "posthumously" in 1944, but he received it from President Truman in October 1945. As a lieutenant colonel, Boyington reported to San Diego in a staff position at Commander Marine Air West Coast. He retired in August 1947, receiving a meritorious promotion to full colonel.

Perennially short of funds and often remarried, Boyington sought work where he could. He became a landscape artist and his 1958 memoir, *Baa Baa Black Sheep*, became the basis of an egregious 1976 television series that was canceled in its second season. A heavy smoker, Boyington contracted cancer and died quietly at home in Fresno, California, in January 1988. He was buried at Arlington National Cemetery wearing dress blues.

In addition to the Medal of Honor, Boyington also wore the Navy Cross, but received no DFCs or Air Medals.

Maj Marion E. Carl (18.5-0-3)

Born – Hubbard, Oregon, November 1, 1915
Died – Roseburg, Oregon, June 28, 1998, aged 82

According to his contemporaries, Marion Carl was the only fighter pilot in the same league as Joe Bauer. Half a century later, the unassuming Carl was still regarded as one of the three finest all-round Naval Aviators of his generation.

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A farm boy, Carl studied engineering at Oregon State College (now OSU) and pursued his goal of a private pilot's license. He soloed in merely 2½ hours – anything less is hardly possible. As an ROTC cadet, Carl, upon graduation in 1938, received a reserve commission as a US Army lieutenant. However, he preferred to apply for US Navy flight training and resigned his army commission. He entered Pensacola and graduated with superior grades in December 1939. Carl served in VMF-1 at Quantico for a year before returning to Pensacola as an instructor. Subsequently, he joined VMF-221 at San Diego, and in December 1941 accompanied the squadron to Midway.

Capt Carl's first combat came during the Japanese carrier strike on the atoll on June 4, 1942. The squadron was largely destroyed, but Carl, flying one of VMF-221's seven F4F-3s, downed a Zero. Upon returning to Hawaii he joined VMF-223, which John L. Smith was preparing for Guadalcanal. Landing at Henderson Field on August 20, Carl entered a period of prolonged combat, emerging as "Smitty's" friendly rival. Carl became the US Marine Corps' first ace with four victories on the 24th. He was shot down on September 9, and upon returning to "Cactus" five days later he famously asked Brig Gen Roy Geiger to ground "John L." for a similar period.

Upon leaving Guadalcanal in October, Carl was just behind Smith, the nation's second-ranking ace with 16.5 victories. In turnaround training in California Maj Carl assumed command of VMF-223 and took it to the Solomons with Corsairs in November 1943. During strikes against Rabaul he downed two more enemy fighters in late December. Withdrawn from combat prematurely, against his wishes, Carl felt that the loss of Boyington and Hanson prompted the Corps to prevent the loss of another leading ace. However, VMF-223 scored only eight additional victories after his last kill, so any lost opportunities would have been minimal.

Carl's postwar career was varied and active. He graduated from the US Naval Test Pilot School in 1945 and went on to achieve the official world speed record in a Douglas D-558-1 Skystreak in August 1947 – the record broken later that year by Chuck Yeager. In 1953 Carl set an altitude record in the D-558-2 Skyrocket, plus an unofficial speed record. Meanwhile, he became the first Marine to make a solo flight in a helicopter, the first to land a jet aboard a ship, commanded the US Marine Corps' first jet squadron and led clandestine photo-reconnaissance missions over mainland China in 1954. Carl was also interested in the manned space program, but at 6ft 2in tall he was too large for the Mercury capsule. The Marine astronaut slot went to Maj John Glenn instead.

In 1965 Brig Gen Carl served with the first Marine brigade in Vietnam, flying combat missions in helicopters and tactical jets. As a major general he commanded the 2nd MAW at Cherry Point, became Inspector General of the US Marine Corps and continued flying a variety of aircraft. With 7,000 flight hours to his name, Carl retired to his native Oregon in 1973.

Marion Carl was killed on the night of June 28, 1998 defending Edna, his wife of 55 years, from a teenage criminal. Marion was buried with full military honors in Arlington National Cemetery. His dress blues bore two Navy Crosses, five DFCs, 14 Air Medals and four Legions of Merit. The murderer was sentenced to death in 1999 but as of this writing he has not been executed.

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2Lt Dean Caswell (7-1-0)

Born – Banning, California, July 24, 1922

Dean Caswell was the top-scoring US Marine Corps carrier pilot of all time. He attended junior college in Edinburg, Texas, for a year before joining the Marines. Upon completion of flight training in Pensacola, Florida, he was commissioned in December 1943. Caswell's squadron, VMF-221, was assigned to CAG-84 aboard *Bunker Hill* during the 1944-45 kamikaze crisis. Upon entering carrier operations 22-year-old 2Lt Caswell had 670 hours total flight time to his name.

In his first combat on March 18, 1945, Caswell scored a triple against "Zekes" near Tomitaka airfield. He added another "Zeke" on April 12. Off Okinawa on the 28th, Caswell and two other Corsair pilots took up their assigned CAP station west of the island. Their controller vectored them 120 miles northward, where they met approximately 25 fighters escorting kamikazes west of Kikai Shima. The Marines immediately attacked, with Caswell tackling a bandit head-on. While lining up a "Tony", Caswell heard his wingman John McManus hollering about a "Zeke" on his leader's tail. Caswell ignored the enemy tracers flashing past and triggered a burst at his onrushing enemy. The "Tony" exploded shortly before McManus shot the "Zeke" off Caswell. In the prolonged dogfight Caswell claimed two more kills and a probable.

The squadron's tenure in *Bunker Hill* ended abruptly when the ship was savaged by two kamikazes on May 11. Dean Caswell ended the war with seven victories – the record among four leatherneck carrier aces – all flying from *Bunker Hill.* Upon completion of his combat tour Caswell had received a Silver Star, two DFCs and four Air Medals.

He continued flying from carriers until 1951. During his second war in Korea in 1952-53, Caswell logged missions in every nightfighter in the US Marine Corps inventory – F4U-5N Corsairs, F7F-3N Tigercats and jet F3D-2 Skyknights. Subsequently, he commanded an air control squadron and VMFA-333 in the F-4 Phantom II era. Caswell completed his service with MAG-32, retiring as a colonel in 1968.

Caswell published a memoir, *My Taking Flight.*

1Lt Jack E. Conger (10-0-0)

Born – Orient, Iowa, April 6, 1921
Died – New Bern, North Carolina, April 22, 2006, aged 85

Jack Conger studied at the South Dakota School of Mines before enlisting in the US Marine Corps, being commissioned nine days after Pearl Harbor. Assigned to VMF-212, he accompanied Joe Bauer's squadron to Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides. There, he was loaned to VMF-223 before John L. Smith's squadron left for "Cactus".

Conger broke even in his first combat on September 13, 1942, downing a "Mitsubishi 97" before being shot down himself. He added a Zero on the 27th and then rejoined VMF-212. October was Conger's biggest month. He claimed a Zero and bomber on the 18th, becoming an ace with another Zero on the 21st. He added another two days later.

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On October 25, largely alone, Conger targeted a formation of Zeroes and expended his ammunition on two of them, gaining a definite kill. Later, witnesses reported the second went down too. Intent on the third, Conger rammed it from astern and both pilots jumped. They were fortunate to survive a low-level bailout, with the Zero pilot splashing down merely 20 yards from the Marine. A US Navy boat quickly arrived and hauled Conger aboard, then went to fetch the enemy aviator, who was bound not to be fetched. As the craft pulled alongside the Japanese jammed his pistol in Conger's face and pulled the trigger. It malfunctioned, so Conger bashed him with a fuel can and hauled him aboard. He was PO2c Shiro Ishikawa, who was just 19 years old. He became the first Zero pilot captured at Guadalcanal. Ishikawa said Japanese officers contended that Marines cooked prisoners and ate them. Yet, after the war, the two erstwhile enemies became fast friends.

Conger ran his score to ten with a float biplane and a float Zero (a Nakajima A6M2-N "Rufe") over Rekata Bay on October, 30. A double ace, he received the Navy Cross and two meritorious Air Medals, plus two "strike/flight" Air Medals for a number of combat sorties. Conger was promoted to captain in April 1943, returning to combat in VMF-114. He put a third fighter in the water when he lost his Corsair near Green Island on April 2, 1944. However, he pinned on gold oak leaves as a major the next month. Conger was wounded again on November 20, but made a full recovery.

Upon retirement as a full colonel in 1964, Conger held the Navy Cross, two DFCs and five Air Medals.

Capt James N. Cupp (12-2-0)

Born – Corning, California, March 28, 1921
Died – Manassas, Virginia, June 2, 2004, aged 83

Twenty-year-old Jim Cupp was commissioned in January 1942 and joined VMF-213. He was promoted to captain in May 1943, and two months later he was in constant combat under Maj Greg Weissenberger. The squadron operated from the Russells, covering the New Georgia landings in June, but Cupp had no decisive aerial encounters. However, July would be Cupp's busiest month by far. He opened his victory log on the 15th with a "Betty" and a Zero near Vella Lavella. Two days later, on a four-and-a-half-hour mission to Kahili and the Shortlands, he downed two Zeroes and shared another. Cupp was back over Kahili the next day, July 18, notching a Zero to make ace with half a victory to spare. He ended his July scoring spree on the 21st with two Zeroes probably destroyed near Rendova.

On September 11 Cupp was credited with two "Tonys" at Fauro Island in the Shortland group just south of Bougainville. Then on the 18th Cupp's flight waded into a formation of "Vals" over Vella Gulf, splashing four and splitting one with 1Lt Walter Stewart, who added three others. With 12 victories Cupp became the squadron's third-ranking ace behind 1Lts Gus Thomas and Ed Shaw.

However, Cupp was shot down during a clash with "Bettys" on September 20, surviving with serious burns. Doctors expressed doubt that he would walk again, but he refused to concede the battle. After nearly 20 months recovering and a dozen or more surgeries, he not only walked but regained flight status. As air operations officer of the

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1st Marine Division in Korea Cupp received a Bronze Star from the US Army in addition to another Bronze Star with combat V. In his two-war career Cupp received the Navy Cross, two Bronze Stars, three DFCs and an Air Medal.

Capt Jefferson J. DeBlanc (9-1-0)

Born – Lockport, Louisiana, February 15, 1921
Died – Lafayette, Louisiana, November 22, 2007, aged 86

Even had he not received the Medal of Honor, Jeff DeBlanc would have been a remarkable individual. With a PhD and recognition as a national-class senior athlete, the Cajun-accented Louisianan presented a disarming exterior for the warrior beneath the surface.

DeBlanc graduated from high school in 1938 and spent three years in college before considering military aviation. He insisted that as a loyal southerner he could not abide joining "the Yankee army" so he chose the US Marine Corps! Commissioned in April 1942, the 21-year-old aviator entered combat at Guadalcanal with VMF-112 that November. With merely 290 hours flight time, what he lacked in experience he offset in determination.

DeBlanc's division was scrambled on November 12 with Japanese aircraft inbound to attack US shipping. He noted Joe Foss and VMF-121 chasing some "Bettys", and was positioned above the bombers in "a fighter pilot's dream." The Wildcat pilots ignored the US Navy's thickening flak – two of DeBlanc's wingmates were shot down, although both survived. DeBlanc closed to near collision range of the nearest Mitsubishi, sending it into the water, and quickly splashed a second. Headed outbound, he shot up another bomber before losing sight of it. A succession of relatively uneventful patrols occupied the next five weeks until DeBlanc exploded a Mitsubishi F1M "Pete" float biplane on December 18.

DeBlanc made history on the last day of January 1943. Leading two divisions of F4Fs on escort to Kolombangara, he took his pilots into a flock of Zeroes. Then, hearing of "Petes" harrying the egressing Dauntlesses and Avengers, he turned south to help. DeBlanc arrived just in time, shooting over the top of an SBD to down a "Pete". The aggressive floatplanes stayed to fight, and DeBlanc stalked one from below and behind, taking it by surprise. However, a flight of "Zeroes" descended on him and, running out of fuel, DeBlanc was resigned to swimming home. In the ensuing dogfight he gunned three bandits before going over the side. Actually, DeBlanc's assailants were JAAF Ki-43 "Oscars". The 11th *Sentai* (Regiment) was the first JAAF unit in the Solomons, and it lost four pilots that day.

DeBlanc and Sgt James Feliton fetched up with a Kolombangara coastwatcher, who notified Solomons Air Command. A pickup was arranged, although on one morning the Cajun awoke to realize the birds were silent. As he later explained, he knew that quiet birds meant creatures nearby – possibly Japanese. "I knew that from when I was living in the swamp back home."

Upon return to base, DeBlanc learned that his "Zero" victories had been seen by the bombers and a coastwatcher. VMF-112's CO, Maj Paul Fontana, recommended DeBlanc for the Navy Cross, which was awarded, although a possible upgrade was inserted in his file.

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Upon returning home DeBlanc was promoted to captain and made a tactics instructor. In early 1944 he joined VMF-422 in the Pacific, and the squadron arrived at Okinawa in April 1945. There, DeBlanc scored his ninth victory (a "Val") on May 28.

Released from active duty after VJ Day, Capt DeBlanc was recalled to active duty in December 1946. He learned he would receive the Medal of Honor, upgraded from the original Navy Cross, for his five-victory mission – the first in US Marine Corps history.

A firm believer in education, DeBlanc received four degrees including a doctorate in education. He taught math and physics in schools in the US and Europe but retained his reserve commission, retiring as a colonel in the New Orleans Marine Air Group. DeBlanc wrote a family history, *Once They Lived by the Sword*. His memoir, *The Guadalcanal Air War*, was published in 2008.

1Lt Phillip C. DeLong (13.166-1-2)

Born – Jackson, Michigan, July 9, 1919
Died – Florida, July 11, 2006, aged 87

After graduating from school in Madison, Michigan, Phil DeLong enrolled in the University of Michigan, entering the US Navy ROTC program. But he left college in favor of US Navy pilot training, receiving his wings and US Marine Corps commission nine days after Pearl Harbor. By the time VMF-212 entered combat under Maj S. B. O'Neill Jr in May 1943, DeLong had 373 hours total flying time.

Nearly all of his victories were scored in the Rabaul area, beginning with two "Zekes" destroyed and a damaged near Tobera airfield on January 9 1944. It was the start of a busy month under new CO Maj Hugh Elwood. DeLong splashed two more on the 17th followed by a solo and three shared kills on the 23rd. He added a "Zeke" and a "Hamp" on the 29th and 31st, running his total to 7.166 destroyed. DeLong got plenty of shooting in over Keravia Bay just south of Rabaul on February 4, hitting four "Zekes" but without a confirmation. A week later he tangled with "Hamps", claiming a probable. However, on February 15 DeLong made up the deficit. Ignoring heavy shipboard AA fire, he accounted for three of six "Vals" the squadron claimed while supporting the New Zealanders' seizure of Green Island.

At the end of his Pacific combat Capt DeLong had received four DFCs and eight Air Medals. He served as a flight instructor for the rest of the war.

In July 1950, less than a month after North Korea invaded the south, Maj DeLong reported to VMF-312, flying F4U-4s from MCAS El Toro, near Los Angeles. The "Checkerboards" deployed to the Western Pacific, embarked in the light carrier USS *Bataan* (CVL-29). DeLong was exec from April to June 1951 under Maj Frank H. Presley, who had received a Navy Cross with VMF-121 at Guadalcanal. The squadron went to sea led by Lt Col J. F. Cole, who had been CO of VMF-111 in the Central Pacific in 1943 and commanded VMF-312 during 1945. DeLong flew 125 sorties between August 1950 and June 1951, but one was especially notable.

On April 21, 1951 DeLong led a four-plane armed reconnaissance along the Yellow Sea coast. The division split up, with DeLong taking 1Lt Harold D. Daigh northward.

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They met inline-engined fighters tentatively identified as F-51 Mustangs – then one of them opened fire. DeLong's Corsair was hit, but in the ensuing dogfight he downed two Yak-9s and Daigh another. They were the first US Marine Corps victories of the Korean War.

Continuing his career, DeLong commanded the Marine Corps Air Facility at Futema, Okinawa, in 1965-66. Subsequently, he gained a bachelor's degree in military science from the University of Omaha. He contributed further to Marine aviation, commanding five squadrons and serving as a flying project officer on the AIM-7 Sparrow missile program at Point Mugu, California. DeLong retired as a full colonel in 1969 holding the Silver Star, Legion of Merit, five DFCs and 17 Air Medals.

In civilian life DeLong was personnel manager of a yacht and marine business in St Petersburg, Florida.

The US Marine Corps' 12th-ranking ace is remembered by the Col Philip C. DeLong Detachment No. 1267 of the Marine Corps League in The Villages, Florida.

Maj Archie G. Donahue (14-1-0)

Born – Casper, Wyoming, October 24, 1917
Died – Rio Hondo, Texas, July 30, 2007, aged 89

Archie Donahue studied engineering at the University of Texas before applying for Naval Aviation Cadets early in 1941. His earliest battle was passing the test for color blindness, but persistence paid off. Donahue told historian Jon Guttman, "The upper ten percent of the class could join the Marines at Corpus Christi. Being an educated Joe, I went for that." He received his wings of gold and second lieutenant's bars on December 4, 1941. In training with VMF-112 in California Donahue survived a midair collision, bailing out of his tailless Wildcat.

VMF-112 alit at Guadalcanal in early November 1942, in time for the campaign's heaviest combat during the major Japanese reinforcement effort. A 26-year-old second lieutenant, Archie Donahue scored his first two kills on the 13th and 14th, fending off Zeroes during American air attacks on enemy convoys.

The squadron recuperated in Australia, then returned north, Donahue being left behind with malaria. He hitch-hiked by C-47 back to Guadalcanal. In May 1943 the "Wolfpack" converted to F4Us. Like most aviators, then-Capt Donahue loved the Corsair. "That thing was marvelous. Its greatest asset was speed."

On May 13 Donahue's division clashed with Zeroes near Florida Island. In the prolonged combat the Marines claimed seven kills for one loss, Donahue being credited with four and a probable (Japanese records indicate four Zeroes destroyed). In the debriefing Donahue credited 1Lt Otto Seifert, who went missing, with saving his life. The "old timer" continued his winning streak, downing a Zero over the Shortlands on June 5 and a pair north of the Russells on the 7th. When VMF-112 rotated Stateside Donahue had scored nine kills in 159 missions.

Promoted to major in May 1944, Donahue joined Maj Henry Ellis' VMF-451. The "Blue Devils" qualified as carrier aviators and deployed with CAG-84 in *Bunker Hill* in January 1945, Tokyo bound. As a Solomons veteran, Donahue appreciated flattops –

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"good food and clean quarters." On April 12 Donahue's flight joined Okinawa-based fighters to intercept Japanese aircraft south of the island. In a prolonged combat he splashed three "Vals" and two "Zekes", while eight other "Blue Devils" claimed 13 more. But for the probable at Guadalcanal, Donahue would have been the US Marine Corps' only two-time ace in a day.

Bunker Hill was severely damaged on May 11, ending Donahue's combat career after 215 missions. He received the Navy Cross, three DFCs and three Air Medals, retiring as a reserve colonel in 1958. Returning to Texas, Donahue worked in the realty business but kept close to aviation. He flew a variety of aircraft with the Confederate (later Commemorative) Air Force, including its A6M3 Zero.

Capt Henry T. Elrod (1-O-O)

Born – Rebecca, Georgia, September 27, 1905
Died – Wake Island, December 23, 1941, aged 36

Henry Elrod retroactively became the first Marine aviator awarded the Medal of Honor for action in World War II. His service at Wake Island remains one of the US Marine Corps' stellar examples of leadership against odds.

After attending the University of Georgia and Yale, Elrod enlisted in the Marines in 1927. Commissioned in 1931, he earned his wings in 1935. Subsequent duty stations were Quantico and San Diego, deploying to Hawaii in January 1941. Maj Paul Putnam's VMF-211 rode *Enterprise* to Wake Island in November 1941, shoring up the assigned defense battalion. Elrod's division was airborne when G3Ms attacked on December 8 across the International Date Line, but the Wildcats were out of position to intercept. After the bombing only Elrod's four fighters remained operational. Two days later Elrod got his chance. He gunned two Mitsubishis, claiming both, while one definitely went down.

On the 11th a Japanese surface force approached, obviously intent on putting troops ashore. Putnam's ordnancemen had installed bomb racks capable of taking 100-pounders on the remaining F4F-3s. Putnam and Elrod, with Capts Herb Frueler and Frank Tharin, attacked three light cruisers, six destroyers, two transports and two patrol craft. "Hammering Hank" Elrod's aim was deadly. His two light bombs struck the destroyer *Kisaragi,* detonating depth charges that sent the 1,770-ton warship down with all hands. Marine artillerymen sank another ship, forcing the Japanese to withdraw. Elrod bellied in with battle damage, his plane a writeoff. The last two Wildcats were lost on the 22nd.

Early on December 23 Japanese naval infantry waded ashore. Elrod was assigned a perimeter on the squadron's flank, using his rifle and machine gun to effect. While rallying his Marines he was shot dead by a Japanese infantryman concealed among enemy bodies.

Elrod's widow received his Medal of Honor in November 1946. His body was permanently interred at Arlington National Cemetery in 1947.

A frigate, USS *Elrod* (FFG-55), was named in his honor in 1985.

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Maj Loren D. Everton (12-1-1)

Born – Crofton, Nebraska, July 14, 1915
Died – Santa Ana, California, February 15, 1991, aged 75

"Doc" Everton acquired his nickname when squadronmates learned of his pharmacy major at the University of Nebraska. He had learned to fly as a teenager, being influenced by a former Marine aviator. Everton retained a US Army Reserve commission for two years following graduation in 1937, then resigned to become a US Marine Corps aviator. At the age of 25 he was winged and commissioned in November 1940.

Assigned to Maj Ira Kimes' VMSB-232 in Hawaii, 1Lt Everton took 60 enlisted men to Midway to prepare facilities for VMSB-231 in November 1941, the latter unit subsequently remaining on the island through the June 1942 battle. Everton eventually joined Joe Bauer's VMF-212, but as he was a prewar pilot "Doc's" experience resulted in him being "loaned" to John L. Smith's VMF-223 bound for Guadalcanal. Landing with the original "Cactus Air Force" contingent on August 20, 1942, Capt Everton was immediately in combat. The next day he led the US Marine Corps' first CAS mission of the war, repelling a Japanese seaborne attempt to land near the perimeter of the 1st Marine Regiment.

Everton scored his first victories on August 26 (being credited with three bombers) and he returned to his parent unit at month-end.

Incomplete record keeping on Guadalcanal left some gaps in Everton's activities. Apparently he was credited with seven planes in October, including two unknown types on an unknown date. On the 18th he claimed two fighters and a third victim, possibly a bomber. Everton became a double ace on October 20, but was wounded and evacuated.

Still a captain, Everton assumed command of VMF-113 at El Toro in February 1943. He was promoted to major effective in May and remained at the helm for 19 months. "Doc" Everton took the squadron to Hawaii in September 1943, proceeding to Tarawa in January. The next month the "Whistling Devils" were based at Engebi, participating in the Central Pacific campaign. Air combat was rare but on March 26 the squadron logged its only kills in the Marshalls. Over Ponape the skipper claimed two "Zekes" and a probable to end his air combat record.

After the war Everton led a training detachment at NAS Los Alamitos, California, served in the intelligence division in Washington, D.C. and commanded the Marine Barracks at Bremerton, Washington. Promoted to full colonel in 1958, subsequently Everton commanded MAG-15. He retired as chief of staff at El Toro in June 1967.

Marion Carl, speaking of his postwar exec in VMF-122, told a Los Angeles area newspaper, "Everton relieved me as squadron commander at Cherry Point. That was the first jet squadron that the Marines had." Carl added, "'Doc' was a rather private guy, a good squadron commander, and people liked him." Ken Walsh added, "He was a fine gentleman and an outstanding aviator."

Everton received the Navy Cross, Purple Heart, and the DFC.

Maj Joseph J. Foss (26-1-0)

Born – Sioux Falls, South Dakota, April 17, 1915

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Died – Scottsdale, Arizona, January 1, 2003, aged 87

Joe Foss earned many titles in his exceptional life – fighter ace, general, governor and philanthropist to name a few. But he insisted, "I'm a farmer. I'll always be a farmer."

Born into a South Dakota farming family, Foss absorbed the agricultural virtues of hard work and independence. When his father died in an accident in 1933, Joe, as the eldest, picked up the slack. He dropped out of school for a time, then began earning tuition for college. Having gained a private pilot's license, he was set upon becoming a US Marine Corps aviator "Because I wanted in a fightin' outfit."

Foss majored in business at the University of South Dakota, then resigned his Army ROTC commission to become a Naval Aviation cadet. Upon receiving his wings in March 1941 he remained at Pensacola as an instructor – after Pearl Harbor he was dismayed to learn that at 26 he was "too old for combat." Wrangling an assignment to a photo-reconnaissance unit in San Diego, Foss soon shifted to fighters. By October 1942 he was a captain and executive officer in Maj Duke Davis' VMF-121. Upon his arrival at Guadalcanal Foss had more than 1,000 hours of flying time.

He notched his first victory on October 13, continuing to score regularly. On the 25th he became the US Marine Corps' first ace in a day during two missions, running his count to 16. On November 7 he added three floatplanes to tie John L. Smith's record, although few paid much attention. Foss was shot down in that combat, returning three days later.

"Smokin' Joe" led his half of the squadron – two four-plane divisions called "the flying circus" – back into combat. He logged another triple on November 12 and downed number 23 (another floatplane) three days later. At that point he was America's leading ace of the war.

In mid November VMF-121 rotated to Australia, returning in early January. Foss was credited with three Zeroes over Vella Lavella on the 15th, running his tally to 26. The squadron left Guadalcanal late that month.

Long after the war Foss was bemused by modelers' requests for information on "his" aircraft markings, as he flew 34 F4Fs at Guadalcanal and scored in ten.

Foss was a national celebrity. He received the Medal of Honor in May 1943, appeared on the cover of *Life* and received his major's oak leaves in June. In July he assumed command of VMF-115 at Santa Barbara and took "Joe's Jokers" to the Solomons that fall, flying Corsairs. Foss had no more opportunity for aerial combat, and rotated out in September 1944 with a recurrence of his Guadalcanal malaria.

The Marine bureaucracy failed to make Foss a regular officer, and although Commandant General Archer Vandegrift offered to waive the process, Foss had already decided to return home. He established a flight service, accepted a USAF commission as a lieutenant colonel and led the South Dakota Air National Guard. Col Foss served on active duty in Air Defense Command during the Korean War. With no Soviet bombers inbound, he amused his colleagues by practicing his duck calls during long, tedious duty watches. He also brought shotguns to work, selling them to enlisted men at bargain prices.

Promoted to brigadier general in 1954, that year Foss began the first of two terms as governor, insisting that the chief executive would continue to pilot himself. He matched his F4U flight time with 1,600 hours in Air National Guard F-51s.

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Subsequently Foss became a television personality, worked with KLM Dutch Airlines, headed the Easter Seals campaign, established the American Football League and was elected president of the National Rifle Association. He was inducted into the National Aviation Hall of Fame and was president of the Air Force Association. With his wife Didi he established the Foss Institute in Arizona, dedicated to providing military speakers to schools around the nation. Throughout his lifetime of celebrity, Joe Foss was a devout Christian and supported Campus Crusade for Christ.

In October 2002 while vacationing in Michigan, Foss suffered a debilitating stroke at the age of 87. His family returned him to Scottsdale, where he died on New Year's Day 2003. Ironically – or fittingly – his last battle occurred on the 60th anniversaries of his arrival and departure from Guadalcanal.

Among other honors, Foss' name is borne by the Sioux Falls airport, and during Operation *Desert Storm* the US Marine Corps established Landing Zone Foss in Saudi Arabia.

Joe Foss received the Medal of Honor and DFC. He was recommended for the Navy Cross at Guadalcanal but the paperwork was lost.

Capt Kenneth D. Frazier (12.5-0-0)

Born – Florence, New Jersey, October 18, 1919
Died – Sourland Mountain, New Jersey, July 17, 1959, aged 39

Ken Frazier graduated from New Jersey State Teachers College in Glassboro, then applied for Naval Aviation training. He won his wings at Corpus Christi, Texas, in March 1942 and, following fighter transition, was sent to Hawaii. There he joined John L. Smith's VMF-223. With 18 other Wildcat pilots Frazier launched off the escort carrier *Long Island* on August 20, 1942, becoming a "plank owner" in the "Cactus Air Force."

In four combats during a six-day period that month Frazier claimed five kills. On August 24 he scrambled from Henderson Field with nine other F4Fs to intercept six inbound B5Ns from the light carrier *Ryujo*. While the top cover engaged the Zero escorts, Capt Rivers Morrell took the alert flight into the bombers. In the confusing combat Frazier claimed two kills, apparently downing one for certain. The US Marine Corps credited ten single-engined bombers and actually downed three. Whatever the score, the young pilots were exultant at their victory. Correspondent Richard Tregaskis, who wrote *Guadalcanal Diary*, said of Frazier, "He could not say surely how many enemy bombers there had been, or whether they were one- or two-motored craft."

Frazier continued scoring steadily, adding a Zero on the 26th and a "Betty" on the 29th. With a Zero on August 30, Frazier became the squadron's third ace, one day after Smith and four after Carl.

September started well for the New Jersey aviator, who claimed a Zero on the 2nd. He dropped another "Betty" on the 11th and experienced a hard-fought combat the next day. Smith and company (including pilots from VMF-224 and VF-5) tied into 25 "Bettys" from an altitude advantage. Frazier claimed one bomber – possibly shared with AA gunners – and went after another. The fleeing "Betty" was already afire, but pulling away. Frazier

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hauled into range and shot it out of a low-level stall, witnessed by cheering men on the beach. Total Wildcat claims amounted to 13 bombers while actual Japanese losses were six.

Two days later (September 14), Frazier shared an unfamiliar twin-engined type with his wingman Willis Lees. The victors identified it as a twin-tailed bomber, but it was a Nakajima J1N Type 2 Land Reconnaissance Plane, later codenamed "Irving".

Frazier's last "Cactus" combat came in a swirling dogfight on October 3, when he was one of five pilots (with Marion Carl and Joe Bauer) who bounced nine Zeroes. The initial attack was devastating – five Mitsubishis went down. Frazier had gunned two bandits and was searching for more when he was surprised from below and behind. His engine gushing flames, he headed out to sea rather than jump into enemy territory. His assailant tried to kill him in his chute but Joe Bauer put an end to that, chasing the assassin northward. Bauer summoned help and Frazier was duly rescued. It was a decisive Wildcat victory – eight actual kills for nine claims.

Frazier was evacuated on October 12, receiving a Navy Cross for 11.5 victories. He remained with VMF-223, was promoted to captain in May 1943 and returned to the Solomons in Corsairs. His only combat on the second tour resulted in a "Hamp" destroyed on December 23.

After the war Frazier graduated from Temple University. During the Korean War he led VMF-311, flying F9F Panthers during June 1952, then remained as executive officer until late August. He then commanded Marine Ground Control Intercept Squadron 3 between August 1952 and February 1953. Lt Col Frazier subsequently commanded the Marine Air Training Detachment at Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, and it was whilst serving in this capacity that he was killed in an FJ-3 Fury in July 1959.

Frazier received the Navy Cross, Bronze Star, three DFCs and 11 Air Medals.

Maj Robert E. Galer (13-4-0)

Born – Seattle, Washington, October 24, 1913
Died – Dallas, Texas, June 27, 2005, aged 91

Bob Galer was a quiet gentleman who seemed cast against type. Far from the public image of a fire-breathing Marine general and ace, his demeanor inevitably was calm and measured, similar to his friend Marion Carl. But like so many successful fighter pilots, once he strapped into the airplane, his tiger blood began stirring.

Galer studied engineering at the University of Washington in his hometown of Seattle, enrolling as a US Navy ROTC cadet. After graduation in 1935 as a Marine second lieutenant, he began pilot training at Naval Reserve Air Base Seattle and proceeded to Pensacola, Florida. He completed the syllabus and received his wings of gold in April 1937. Nonetheless, all Marine junior officers attended The Basic School at Quantico, so Galer did not have a squadron assignment until he was posted to VMS-3 in the Virgin Islands.

Subsequently assigned to VMF-2, Galer began honing the skills that would serve him so well at Guadalcanal. However, his early career was marred by an incident off San Diego when, in August 1940, his F3F-2 went into the water during CQs aboard *Saratoga*. After the plane was raised in 1991, Galer examined it at the San Diego Aerospace Museum.

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"I'm glad to see the fuel selector was on," he quipped. Examination showed a faulty fuel line. Today, BuNo 0976 is restored and displayed at the Naval Aviation museum in Pensacola.

Galer went to Hawaii with the squadron, which by then had been redesignated VMF-211. As one of the few Marine landing signal officers, he stayed at Ewa when Maj Paul Putnam took most of the pilots and Wildcats to Wake Island.

Capt Galer stood up VMF-224 in May 1942 and was promoted to major in early August. When he led the squadron into Guadalcanal on August 30, VMF-224 was only the second fighter unit in the nascent "Cactus Air Force." Combat was frequent at Guadalcanal. Galer claimed eight victories in six combats during September, beginning with a Zero and a "Betty" on the 2nd. He became an ace with another double on the 11th, and was credited with three bombers on the 28th.

On October 14 Galer became "Cactus'" third-ranking ace, running his tally to 13 – the same day that Joe Foss notched his second. However, it was not one-sided. Galer had been shot down offshore on September 11 and again on October 2, fetching up at Tulagi.

Before he left "Cactus" on October 29 Galer received the Navy Cross from Adm Chester Nimitz. Additionally, Galer received the DFC, five Air Medals and a rare British DFC during his 30 missions. In a rare reversal, Galer's Navy Cross was rescinded in favor of the Medal of Honor, President Roosevelt presenting him with the medal in March 1943.

Galer celebrated the US Marine Corps' birthday on November 10, 1943 with a promotion to lieutenant colonel. Subsequently, he served as operations officer for the 3rd MAW in the Pacific. After the war Galer attended the Armed Forces Staff College and completed a series of staff assignments, rising to full colonel in 1951.

Like so many World War II veterans, Galer also served in Korea. As a full colonel, he was assistant chief of staff for the 1st MAW from March to May 1952. Despite his rank and Medal of Honor, Galer flew several combat missions, including a 30-plane strike near Wonsan on August 5. Flak tagged his AU-1 Corsair, and he barely parachuted to safety. A Sikorsky HO3S-1 helicopter was summoned, and 1Lt E. J. McCutcheon executed a high-risk pickup over steep terrain. Galer slid into the rescue collar and the chopper lifted off, dangling him "as we flew down the valley, everybody shooting at us." Thereafter Galer assumed command of MAG-12. By the time he returned to ConUS he had received another DFC and a Legion of Merit.

Later assignments included the Air War College and duty at Headquarters Marine Corps. Galer's aviation duty expanded as director of the US Navy's Guided Missiles Division, retiring in July 1957. At retirement Brig Gen Galer held the Medal of Honor, two DFCs, five Air Medals, the Legion of Merit, the Purple Heart and the British DFC. He died in Dallas but is buried in the Texas State Cemetery in Austin.

1Lt Robert M. Hanson (25-2-0)

Born – Lucknow, India, February 4, 1920
Died – Solomon Islands, February 3, 1944, aged 23

For a young man of 23, Robert M. Hanson possessed an uncommon worldview. His parents, Reverend and Mrs Harry Hanson, were Methodist missionaries who performed

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good works among India's teeming populace after World War I. Bob, the second of four sons, was born in Lucknow in February 1920. He grew up with Hindu children, chasing monkeys and potting squirrels with his slingshot.

Hanson was sent to the US for junior high school, returned to India to complete his education and became a successful boxer and wrestler. At the age of 18 he toured Europe by bicycle, viewing German ambition firsthand. Thereafter the combative youngster entered Hamline University in Minnesota, causing his family distress by earning tuition money as a nightclub bouncer.

Upon acceptance for US Navy flight training Hanson earned his gold wings and lieutenant's bars in February 1943, just days past his 23rd birthday. He had less than a year to live.

As a replacement pilot in VMF-214 Hanson opened his victory log with a "Tony" over Munda on August 4, following with a Zero near Vella Lavella on the 26th. Because the squadron had now completed its third forward tour, but Hanson had only participated in one of them, he was transferred to VMF-215 to fly the required second and third tours. By now a first lieutenant, Hanson claimed three kills over Empress Augusta Bay on November 1 to make ace, only to be shot down minutes later. Taking to his raft, he was rescued by the crew of a destroyer some six hours later – the sailors who picked him up reported that they had found a husky Marine singing "You'd Be So Good To Come Home To."

War correspondents latched on to Hanson, dubbing him "Butcher Bob," the Marine superstar who came from far back in the pack and nearly caught the leaders in the Solomons scoring race. Already an ace, Hanson, in just six more missions to Rabaul during two weeks in January 1944, was credited with 20 victories, hauling him to within reach of Joe Foss' score and Greg Boyington's alleged 26. Yet despite his success Hanson did not usually lead a division. Skipper Bob Owens generally followed seniority, with majors and captains leading four-plane flights. However, later in his tour Hanson did fly as the subordinate division leader in an eight-plane flight.

Many of Hanson's victories were claimed while flying alone, as evident from his combat reports. At least one wingman stated that Hanson made every effort to shake him in clouds, presumably to pursue a lone-wolf agenda. Because the Marine Corps had no victory credits board to evaluate claims, combat results were usually assessed on the "honor system."

Hanson had his future laid out. He felt certain of emerging as the leading Marine ace, if not America's top gun, and planned to return to India after the war. He told friends of his vision of a mercenary career with a maharajah, inventing a convenient war if necessary. Hanson's squadron mates also laid plans – their star's 24th birthday was February 4, and VMF-215 anticipated a suitable bash. On the 3rd, returning from a TBF escort to Rabaul, Hanson was unblooded, perhaps for the first time. Leading Hal Spears' second division, he dropped out of formation to strafe the lighthouse on Cape St. George, New Ireland. Light ground fire flared up, but other pilots were unconcerned. Then Hanson's Corsair nosed down, caught a wingtip and cartwheeled to destruction. The squadron was stunned.

Hanson received a posthumous promotion to captain, and his mother received his Medal of Honor that August, taking little solace in the citation's description of her son as "a master of individual air combat." A destroyer (DD-832) bearing his name was launched in 1945. Hanson also received the Navy Cross and the Air Medal.

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Maj Herbert H. Long (10-0-0)

Born – New York City, April 25, 1919
Died – Winston-Salem, North Carolina, September 27, 2001, aged 82

After attending college Herb Long was commissioned in December 1941 with so many other prewar aviators. The following spring he joined VMF-122, serving at Espiritu Santo under Capt Elmer Brackett. In December Long was among the pilots transferred out, filling some slots in VMF-121. By month-end he was at Guadalcanal with nearly 550 hours flight time. Over the next few months he benefited from experienced leaders, notably Don Yost and Joe Renner.

"Trigger" Long scored his first kill with a "Zeke" on January 11, 1943, following with a double four days later. But he was wounded on the 20th, spending some time off flight status. Long returned to VMF-122 in mid March, then under Greg Boyington, but had little combat before summer. The squadron supported the New Georgia campaign, and on July 7 Capt Long's division met a formation of "Bettys" over the beach. "Trigger" selected one and closed in. Exchanging gunfire with the tail gunner, Long silenced the "stinger" position and aimed at the starboard engine. He lost his victim temporarily in clouds but emerged to find it ditching offshore. He regarded his fourth victory as among the most memorable.

Long made ace on July 12, adding a sixth victory five days later. At the end of his Solomons tour he had logged 70 missions.

Upon returning to the States Long was assigned to Joe Foss' VMF-115, advancing to the rank of major in January 1944. Shortly before "Joe's Jokers" left for the Pacific Long moved to Maj Hank Ellis' newly established VMF-451 at Mojave. In January 1945 the squadron was teamed with VMF-452 in CAG-84 aboard *Bunker Hill*, commencing combat operations the next month. Consequently, the Solomons veteran anticipated flying over the enemy home islands.

Twenty months after his sixth victory Long returned to aerial combat, downing a "Zeke" over Miyazaki airfield on March 18, 1945. That month, in strikes against the Japanese fleet at Kure, Long was credited with three rocket hits on the anchored light carrier *Ryujo*. He claimed a double victory on April 3 and splashed a "Val" for his tenth kill while on CAP east of Okinawa during the major kamikaze attack of the 16th.

Bunker Hill was severely damaged by suiciders on May 11, knocking CAG-84 out of the war. Back home, Long assumed command of VMF-114 in early August, preparing it for the anticipated invasion of Japan. However, the atomic bombs ended the war that month. Remaining in the US Marine Corps postwar, Long filled a variety of cockpit and staff slots. He served on the staff of the Joint Chiefs in the crucial period 1964 to 1966, and subsequently went to Vietnam. There, as a colonel, he was chief of staff of the 1st MAW, retiring in 1968.

Subsequently, Long spent 30 years with Bethlehem Steel Corporation, retiring as a district manager in 1986. In 2000 Long was inducted into the Carrier Aviation Hall of Fame in Charleston, South Carolina, one of the few Marines so honored.

Herb Long died of Parkinson's Disease complications. He is buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

He received seven DFCs, 17 Air Medals, the Legion of Merit and two Purple Hearts.

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1Lt William P. Marontate (13-1-0)

Born – Seattle, Washington, December 3, 1919
Died – Guadalcanal, January 15, 1943, aged 23

Hailing from Seattle like Bob Galer, Bill Marontate spent two years at the University of Washington to fill the college requirement for military flight training. While there he learned to fly as a civilian, then entered the US Navy as a seaman recruit in June 1941. He graduated from flight training in March 1942, joining VMF-121 that month.

"Duke" Davis' squadron deployed to New Caledonia later that year, proceeding to Guadalcanal in early October. One of eight pilots in exec Joe Foss' "flying circus," Marontate scored his first victory, a Zero, on the 18th, adding another and a probable two days later. His next claim was noted as a "smoker" bomber on the 23rd, but it was included in his record of enemy planes destroyed. The second week of November was frantic for Davis' pilots. Marontate scored seven kills in three combats – three floatplanes on the 7th, two "Bettys" on the 11th and two more on the 12th.

The night Joe Bauer disappeared, Joe Foss came down with severe malaria. Unable to fly, he was sidelined for several days so "Duke" Davis appointed Marontate as exec in Joe's absence. Despite Marontate's status as a second lieutenant, Davis valued experience over rank.

The squadron returned to New Caledonia in mid November, and Marontate was promoted to first lieutenant on 1 December. He was transferred to VMO-251 (a fighter squadron despite the observation designation) just before Christmas. He returned to VMF-121 on New Year's Day, rejoining "Joe's Flying Circus." Marontate notched two "Vals" on January 5 and, in one of the squadron's final combats, he downed a Zero off Vella Lavella. However, he was variously assumed victim of fuel starvation or a collision with a Zero. In any case, he never returned. "Guts" Marontate's final total of 13 victories remained second in the squadron only to Foss.

Awarded the Navy Cross, Marontate also received a posthumous promotion to captain after the war.

Maj Frederick R. Payne Jr (5.5-0-0)

Born – Elmira, New York, July 31, 1911

"Fritz" Payne was the first American fighter ace to celebrate his 100th birthday, in July 2011. At that time he was one of fewer than ten US Marine Corps aces still living.

Young Payne's educational career was varied. The son of a naval officer, he attended the Annapolis preparatory school at Culver before entering the Naval Academy in the Class of 1934. He left after two years in favor of San Diego State teacher's College. Subsequently, he graduated from the University of Arizona in 1935. Although a member of the US Army ROTC, Payne resigned to enter Naval Aviation cadet training. He received his lieutenant's commission and aviator designation in 1936.

Known as "Beanie" in the US Marine Corps, Payne joined VMF-9M in October 1940 (soon redesignated VMF-2), then moved to the newly established VMF-221 in July 1941 and finally to Joe Bauer's VMF-212 in early 1942. Promoted captain in February that year,

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Payne was among the fighter pilots immediately available for combat deployment from Ewa at the start of the Guadalcanal campaign. One of Bauer's "loaners" to VMF-223, Payne rose to major in August after only six months as a captain. Unusually experienced, he entered combat with some 1,800 hours flight time, heavily slanted toward fighters.

Payne put his background to good use, flying almost daily. He shared a bomber on September 14 and logged a solo kill two weeks later. When VMF-212 arrived as a whole, Payne became Bauer's exec and continued scoring. Often leading mixed formations of US Marine Corps and US Navy pilots, he claimed two bombers on the 18th, followed by Zeroes on the 21st and 23rd.

Payne was evacuated near the end of October, returning to ConUS in December. He received the Navy Cross, a DFC and five Air Medals for 30 combat sorties. During the homeward voyage Payne led VMF-212 from November 1942 until February 1943, subsequently rising to command MAG-23. Promoted to lieutenant colonel in November 1943, he saw service at Kwajalein, Hollandia and Guam as air liaison officer with amphibious forces.

Postwar service included an XO–CO tour of transport squadron VMR-152 in 1948-49. In that same period Payne served as an operations officer in Exercise *Miki*, the largest US Marine Corps–US Army amphibious maneuver of the postwar era. In Korea Col Payne commanded Marine Air Control Group 2 during 1952, and later was liaison officer between the 1st MAW and the Fifth Air Force. He received the Legion of Merit for his Korean service.

With Marine aviation increasingly expanding into rotary wing aircraft, Payne was rated in helicopters, and in 1956 he became the first Marine to land on the dedicated helicopter carrier USS *Thetis Bay* (LPH-6). Col Payne commanded MAG-36 at Tustin, California, in 1955-57 before taking up his final post as air commander for nuclear weapon tests. He retired in August 1958 with 4,720 hours, 25 arrested landings and 30 helicopter shipboard landings to his name.

"Fritz" Payne holds the Navy Cross, DFC, Legion of Merit and six Air Medals.

Maj Donald H. Sapp (10-4-2)

Born – Center Hill, Florida, December 29, 1915
Died – Santa Ana, California, February 26, 1988, aged 72

Don Sapp joined the US Marine Corps Reserve at the age of 19 and subsequently attended the University of Miami for four years. He entered aviation cadet training in August 1940 and was commissioned at Pensacola in June 1941. Sapp joined VMF-222 under Maj Max J. Volcansek, completing three combat tours with the "Flying Deuces". He was promoted to major in May 1943, becoming squadron executive officer. In his first combat (September 14) Sapp claimed two "Zekes" at Ballale while Volcansek and others accounted for three more. On October 11 Sapp defeated a "Zeke" during a sweep over Kahili. At that time Japanese air raids were harassing Americans ashore, inflicting frequent casualties. Therefore, Marines and sailors appreciated Sapp's work when he splashed a "Helen" bomber west of Itainina Bay, Bougainville, on November 20.

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February 1944 was Sapp's biggest month. He achieved acedom with a confirmed "Zeke" and a probable on the 3rd, another on the 11th and then two and a probable on the 17th, all over or around Rabaul. Sapp ended his scoring on March 12 with two confirmed, a probable and a damaged over Tobera airfield.

Returned Stateside, Sapp became CO of East Coast replacement training squadron VMF-524 from June 1944 to March 1945. He then assumed command of VMF-122 at Peleliu in late May, remaining through VJ Day.

Making a career of the US Marine Corps, Sapp was promoted to lieutenant colonel in January 1951. He received a BA in business administration from the University of Florida in 1959. During the Vietnam War Sapp held staff positions in the Ninth Expeditionary Brigade and the 3rd Marine Amphibious Force at Da Nang. He retired as a colonel in 1968 and subsequently changed his surname to Stapp, reputedly to spare his children further chiding from their friends.

Sapp received the Navy Cross, two DFCs and three Air Medals.

1Lt Howard E. Segal (12-1-0)

Born – Chicago, 1 September 1920
Died – Scottsdale, Arizona, June 3, 1998, aged 77

"Murderous Manny" Segal was born in Chicago but his Jewish father moved the family to Boston before settling in New York. There the young Segal excelled at sports, especially boxing, qualifying for the golden gloves tournament. After a two-year art career, Segal pursued his aviation interest by enlisting in the US Navy in 1941. He received his wings as a 22-year-old Marine second lieutenant in October 1942. Assigned to VMF-221 in May 1943, he took to the Corsair and scored his first two victories in a fight between Rendova and Munda on June 30. Thereafter he adopted his father's nickname on the irrefutable basis that "Murderous Manny" sounded tougher than "Murderous Harold."

Eleven days later VMF-221 was embroiled in a combat near Kula Gulf, with Segal claiming three Zeroes. "I caught the top Zero first," Segal reported. "He blew up like matchwood. The second Zero never knew what hit him. My dive practically carried me into his cockpit – he hit the sea a mass of flaming wreckage." However, Segal's Corsair, named *Ruthie* for his mother, had absorbed more Japanese ammunition than it could tolerate. He ditched off New Georgia, sustaining facial injuries, but recovered. Segal and Jim Swett became "swimming partners" in that episode, and they were rescued the next day and returned directly to the squadron. "Murderous Manny" (a misnomer if ever there was one among laid-back Marine aviators) ran his toll to ten by mid November when VMF-221 rotated home.

In order to complete a third line tour, Segal flew with VMF-211, gunning two "Hamps" on January 24, 1944. Two days later he got wet again when an oil leak forced him down off Torokina. At the end of his tour he had been awarded two DFCs and an Air Medal. He said of his survival, "A man named God was sitting beside me."

In March 1944 some 500 people, including the Manhattan Borough president, met at the Hotel Pennsylvania to hail the returning former art student.

In early 1945 Capt Segal returned to the Pacific, flying primarily ground-support

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missions with VMF-115 in the Philippines. He garnered another DFC and three Air Medals following this deployment.

Segal left the US Marine Corps in early 1946, retaining a reserve major's commission until 1958. He entered the real estate business in Los Angeles but also lived in Nevada and Arizona. He died in Scottsdale in 1998.

Segal held three DFCs and four Air Medals.

Capt Edward O. Shaw (14.5-1-0)

Born – Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, October 6, 1918
Died – Mojave, California, July 31, 1944, aged 25

"Bud" Shaw attended Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, in order to meet minimum education requirements prior to being accepted for officer training in the US Marine Corps. After commissioning at Corpus Christi in September 1942 and subsequent fighter orientation, Shaw joined Maj Wade Britt's VMF-213 in January 1943. He was promoted to first lieutenant in March.

Shaw flew three combat tours from April to December 1943. He quickly made friends in VMF-213, becoming especially close to Gus Thomas. As an engineering officer Shaw insisted on flying every aircraft in the "Hell Hawks", and he came to know the maintenance men both personally and professionally.

An aggressive aviator, Shaw maximized his opportunities, claiming triples in his first two combats followed by two doubles. He opened his scoring log on June 30 when Maj Greg Weissenberger's pilots claimed 20 victories in two fights, although the skipper was shot down and rescued. Shaw was flying in 1Lt John Morgan's division when the quartet spotted a flight of float biplanes intent on bombing Rendova. The Corsairs claimed all nine "Petes" seen, with Shaw accounting for three. Actually, the Corsairs downed seven of thirteen from the 938th and 958th *Kokutai*. He followed them with two "Bettys" and a Zero destroyed during a Vella Lavella mission two weeks later.

Shaw continued scoring at the expense of floatplanes, with a biplane and a monoplane on July 17 and two "Zekes" the next day. Thus, he notched seven kills in three missions over four days. Shaw downed a "Zeke" over Kahili on September 11, adding one and splitting another on the 23rd. He ended his scoring on October 11 with another "Zeke" near Kahili – the second and last time he scored singles.

With five floatplanes among his 14.5 victories, Shaw likely held a record among American fighter pilots. Despite frequent combat, his Corsairs were apparently only hit once by Japanese fighters.

As a captain Shaw commanded VMF-213 during the return trip to the US in December and January. Subsequently posted to MCAS Mojave, Shaw was killed while flying a Corsair in dive tests in July 1944. His body was flown to Spokane for burial, the transport plane escorted by Maj Don Frame leading 17 Corsairs from VMF-213. At the funeral Gus Thomas said of his friend, "I have never known, or hope to know, a person who was more considerate of others." At that point Thomas had only two-and-a-half years to live.

Shaw received two DFCs and three Air Medals.

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Maj John L. Smith (19-0-0)

Born – Lexington, Oklahoma, December 26, 1914
Died – Encino, California, June 10, 1972, aged 57

As summarized by his friend and squadronmate Marion Carl, "John L. Smith may have had some problems, but combat leadership wasn't one of them."

Smith graduated from the University of Oklahoma in 1936, receiving a US Army ROTC commission in the field artillery. However, he resigned that summer in preference to a commission as a US Marine Corps second lieutenant. Smith completed the Basic School in Philadelphia and later applied for flight training. He entered Pensacola in July 1938, being designated a Naval Aviator 12 months later.

At the age of 27 Smith stood up VMF-223 on May 1, 1942, never having commanded a unit. Given little time, he drilled the pilots heavily in tactics and gunnery – training that paid off before long. On August 3 the squadron's Wildcats boarded the escort carrier *Long Island* and catapulted off on the 20th, landing at newly-named Henderson Field on Guadalcanal. Universally called "John L.," Smith soon proved to be the right man in the right place at the right time. His thoroughly mission-oriented leadership and tough, no-nonsense demeanor seemed to define a US Marine Corps squadron commander, although later Marines said he described himself as "a rifleman commanding a fighter squadron."

Once established, Major Smith got down to business. He claimed one of the squadron's first three victories the second day ashore – a Zero near Savo Island. Thereafter he usually scored in multiples – two bombers each on the 26th and 29th and a record four Zeroes on the 30th. During September Smith recorded eight kills in six combats, running his tally to 16. He notched another Zero on October 2 but then bailed out and walked back to base. He ended his string with a "Rufe" floatplane on the 10th, and VMF-223 was relieved two days later. At that point Smith was America's ranking ace, and he received appropriate publicity. He appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine on December 7, 1942 and received the Medal of Honor in February. He was also awarded Britain's Distinguished Service Order (DSO), second only to the Victoria Cross.

In April 1943 Smith became CO of MAG-32 at Cherry Point, remaining there until September 1943. He was promoted to lieutenant colonel that November, and returned to command the group between September and November 1944. He was executive officer under a Nicaragua veteran, Col Frank Wirsig, from November 1944 to June 1945, operating in the Philippines. In MAG-32 Smith became the only US Marine Corps ace to command a Marine air group or to receive the Legion of Merit during the war.

In January 1951 Smith pinned on the eagles of a full colonel, and in Korea he led MAG-33 from just before the armistice until February 1954. Subsequently, he was chief of staff for the 1st MAW.

With a superior professional reputation, not to mention the Medal of Honor, "Smitty" seemed destined for stars. Some of his contemporaries urged him to "tone it down" in dealing with the US Marine Corps hierarchy, but the devoted aviator frequently clashed with "the ground." And in the Marines, the ground is primary – aviation and artillery are supporting arms. Consequently, Smith was passed over for brigadier general. It was a blow to the aviation community, which had been growing contenders for Commandant for

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about two decades. A few standout aviators peaked at three stars, notably Dick Mangrum of Guadalcanal SBD fame and the very astute Keith McCutcheon, considered "Mr Close Air Support." Two other notable prospects fell victim to bureaucratic snafus or professional jealousy – Joe Foss and Marion Carl.

Smith was assistant director of aviation at Headquarters from March 1958 until his retirement on September 1, 1960. In retirement he represented Grumman in Europe, then returned to the US for a decade with North American Rockwell. However, with declining business in the Rocketdyne subsidiary, Smith was among those let go. At the age of 57 Smith, reportedly, was regarded as too old for retraining for an industry job, and he slumped into depression. He committed suicide at his Encino home in 1972, leaving behind three sons and a daughter.

Smith received the Medal of Honor, Navy Cross, Legion of Merit, DFC, Bronze Star, four Air Medals and the DSO.

Capt William N. Snider (11.5-1-0)

Born – Cairo, Illinois, December 12, 1918
Died – Denver, Colorado, March 2, 1969, aged 50

Bill Snider was commissioned in May 1942. After operational training he reported to Maj H. J. Michener's VMF-221 at Ewa, Hawaii, in early December and was soon promoted to first lieutenant. He began flying combat missions at Guadalcanal in March 1943.

Adm Yamamoto's I Operation on April 1 was divided between the Solomons and New Guinea. More than 50 Zeroes launched a fighter sweep to beat down their American counterparts on Guadalcanal and the Russells. The Marines downed six – they claimed 18 destroyed, including three by Snider. Flying with "Zeke" Swett and "Manny" Segal, Snider was racing in fast company, as few pilots scored a triple on their "first time at bat."

On April 8 the Pratt & Whitney in Snider's F4F lost oil and the engine seized. He force landed safely and continued flying.

Snider was promoted to captain in September, by which time the squadron had converted to Corsairs. However, Snider had few opportunities to score that summer and fall. Indeed, he had to wait until October 17 – six-and-a-half months after his promising debut – before he gunned down three "Zekes" over Kahili. He was credited with two kills and a probable.

The squadron returned to ConUS in December and reorganized at Miramar in January 1944. Selected for carrier duty, VMF-221 prepared to deploy under the command of Maj E. S. Roberts. Teamed with VMF-451 in *Bunker Hill*, the "Fighting Falcons" anticipated heavy opposition when the fast carriers went against the Japanese homeland in early 1945. Sixteen months after his last Solomons victories, Snider began his record as a carrier pilot. On February 16, during a fighter sweep on the initial Tokyo strikes, he and 1Lt Donald G. MacFarlane split a "Betty". Other Corsair pilots burned planes on the ground and sparked an oil fire amid some hangars.

On March 18 Snider waded into a large dogfight near Tomitaka airfield. He registered two "Franks" and a "Zeke" among the 13 kills the squadron claimed. Snider next connected

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on two big kamikaze days, claiming a "Tony" on April 6, then a "Tojo" and a "Zeke" on the 16th. He had scored six-and-a-half victories in 20 missions, and with Arch Donahue was the only Marine to become a shore- and carrier-based ace.

Upon leaving the US Marine Corps Snider entered the pharmaceutical business in Denver. He died in March 1969, barely aged 50.

Snider received the Silver Star, three DFCs and six Air Medals.

Capt Harold L. Spears (15-3-0)

Born – Portsmouth, Ohio, December 31, 1919
Died – El Toro, California, December 6, 1944, aged 24

Hal Spears was one of Maj Bob Owens' stars in the "Fighting Corsairs" triumvirate including Bob Hanson and Don Aldrich.

After attending Ohio University Spears entered the Naval Academy program, winning his wings and commission at Corpus Christi in August 1942. When the squadron alit at Guadalcanal in July 1943 Spears was a recently promoted first lieutenant. Dark and intense, he was motivated to succeed. Spears scored his first victories when he splashed two "Rufe" floatplanes over Rekata Bay on August 19. He added a pair of "Zekes" on a mission to Ballale on September 2, then he pinned on captain's bars in late November.

A Rabaul mission made Spears an ace, as he claimed two "Zekes" and a "Tony" on January 18. Extremely consistent, he ran his score to ten in only his fourth combat two days later. However, Spears was not finished that month. Returning to the Rabaul hunting ground, he notched a "Zeke" and a probable on the 22nd, plus two kills and two probables on the 26th, for a total of 12. That same day, when the squadron claimed 14 victories, Aldrich tied with Spears while Hanson reached 21.

In a noontime dogfight near Rabaul on February 3 Spears claimed two more victories. Despite Hanson's success, he was flying in Spears' division that day, and for perhaps the first time he was unable to make a claim. En route back to base Hanson radioed Spears asking permission to break formation and strafe a lighthouse on New Ireland. Spears consented, only to see "Butcher Bob's" Corsair nose into the water, apparently the victim of ground fire. Spears scored his 15th victory on 7 February – only the second time he did not gain multiple kills.

Although the squadron remained in the Pacific, Spears had completed his three forward tours, returning to the US in March 1944. Assigned to operational training duty, Spears joined VMF-462 at El Toro. In December he died in an accident flying an SBD-5 – former VMF-215 squadronmate Maj Arthur T. Warner was injured in the incident.

Although a triple ace, Spears was only awarded the DFC and two Air Medals.

Capt James E. Swett (15.5-4-0.25)

Born – Seattle, Washington, June 15, 1920
Died – Redding, California, January 18, 2009, aged 88

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After April 1943, the ambition of every hard-charging Marine aviation cadet was to "do a Jimmy Swett." Seven victories in a pilot's first combat was almost unheard of, even in the target-rich environment of World War II.

Seattle produced a remarkable selection of Marine aviators for World War II, including Bob Galer of VMF-224, Bill Marontate of VMF-121 and Dick Mangrum who led VMSB-232, the first dive-bomber squadron ashore on Guadalcanal. Jim Swett was born there in 1920, but his family moved to southern California where he entered San Mateo College in 1939. An enthusiastic private pilot, he logged several hundred hours before entering US Navy flight training in August 1941. With considerable civilian experience, Swett excelled in the US Navy. Graduating near the top of his class, he was offered a US Marine Corps commission. Swett accepted in April 1942. A year later he was famous.

Under Capt Robert R. Burns VMF-221 went to Guadalcanal in March 1943, shortly after the Japanese evacuated. Swett entered combat as a 22-year-old first lieutenant with 433 hours of naval flight time. On the morning of April 7 Swett's division had just landed from a Russells patrol when an alert sounded. The Wildcats scrambled with other AirSols fighters, meeting 67 "Vals" escorted by 110 Zeroes. The US fighter formation was soon split up, leaving Swett seemingly alone in a sky full of targets. He jumped on a string of Aichis headed for Tulagi harbor. Some accounts state that he was flying his first mission, but in fact it was his first combat. At any rate, he flew like a veteran. Working from back to front, he downed seven "Vals", taking serious hits in the process from enemy rear gunners and Allied ships, three of which were sunk. Ignoring US AA fire, Swett caught the last three Aichis in their dives. Then he gunned another before running out of ammunition.

Swett's eighth "Val" went into the books as a probable, while he ditched his battered Wildcat off Tulagi. Number eight, however, was later confirmed by physical evidence. While Swett recovered in the sickbay, an intelligence officer took it upon himself to track the path of the damaged Aichi, and days later he returned with a data plate. As Swett reported, the gunner had died fighting and the pilot was killed – Swett surmised that the latter was eaten by natives. Fifty years later, Swett was still trying to get the Marines to correct the record.

Between his convalescence, transition to F4Us and diminishing action, seven weeks passed before Swett tangled with enemy aircraft. On June 30 the huge Japanese attack on Guadalcanal produced 16 claims for VMF-221, with Swett accounting for two bombers and splitting a Zero with an unknown F4F pilot.

As AirSols operations pressed ever northward, the Corsair's range increasingly became a limiting factor. Swett downed a "Betty" and a Zero over Kula Gulf on July 11, raising his score to 11.5. But in protecting his squadronmate "Manny" Segal, Swett took disabling hits to his Corsair and went in the water. Rescued by friendly natives, both men were rowed to safety along with a coast watcher.

Paperwork finally caught up with Swett when, on October 9, he received the Medal of Honor from Maj Gen Ralph Mitchell, commanding US Marine Corps aviation in the Southwest Pacific. However, the highest decoration made no difference operationally as Swett continued flying missions. Swett's three-month dry spell ended on October 18 when he notched a "Zeke" over Kahili. He logged his final Solomons victories on November 2,

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protecting a naval task force in Empress Augusta Bay. Separated from his division, Swett joined a section of P-38s chasing "Vals" and splashed two. Before the fight broke up he shot a "Tony" off a Lightning's tail, but his Japanese foe evaded. The squadron rotated home in December and Swett took time to get married.

Although able to avoid combat as a Medal of Honor recipient, Swett relished the prospects of becoming a carrier aviator. When VMF-221 deployed in *Bunker Hill* in early 1945 he remained with Maj Ed Roberts' crew, flying missions over the enemy homeland. On the morning of May 11 Capt Swett downed a "Judy" dive-bomber near the task force, then watched *Bunker Hill* nearly torn apart by two kamikazes. He recovered aboard *Enterprise* and made his way Stateside. On VJ Day VMF-221 was preparing for another Pacific tour – the invasion of Japan.

After the war Swett assumed command of VMF-141, a reserve squadron at Alameda, in California, but during the Korean War his Medal of Honor kept him out of combat. He retired in 1970 as a full colonel. Both of Swett's sons became Marines during the Vietnam War. Eventually Swett took over the family's industrial machinery business in San Francisco, retiring in 1983 and moving to northern California. A popular speaker, he pleased audiences with his puckish, often irreverent humor, and he appeared on the History Channel's hit series *Dogfights*. He died of heart failure in 2009 and is buried in the Northern California Veterans Cemetery near Redding.

Jim Swett was the only Marine to become an ace in both the Wildcat and Corsair. He received the Medal of Honor, two DFCs, four Air Medals and the Purple Heart.

Capt Wilbur J. Thomas (18.5-3.333-3)

Born – El Dorado, Kansas, October 29, 1920
Died – California, January 28, 1947, aged 26

"Gus" Thomas attended El Dorado Junior College in his home town, received a pilot's license in May 1941 and then applied for the Naval Aviation cadet program. He was accepted and graduated as a 21-year-old second lieutenant in July 1942 – the same month VMF-213 was established at Ewa, Hawaii. Thomas joined the squadron under Maj Wade Britt, proceeding to Guadalcanal in early April 1943.

Thomas was one of the most consistently deadly fighter pilots in the naval service. Flying from the Russells and "Cactus" between the end of June and mid October, he claimed 16.5 kills in just five combats. He was good from the start, with four kills and a probable in his first encounter on June 30. In his action report Thomas noted, "My plane performed wonderfully." Although shot down on July 11, he quickly reached safety. Thomas was soon back in the saddle, as four days later he added two Zeroes and a "Betty" over Vella Lavella.

Trolling Kahili on September 11, Thomas scored a triple kill to become a double ace. On the 23rd he gunned three "Zekes" and split another before being shot down a second time. But his luck held, and he was picked up again. A Shortlands mission on October 11 produced another triple, the fourth of Thomas' career. He also hit two other "Zekes" and was awarded probables on both.

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The "Hell Hawks" returned home in early December, and Thomas received a belated holiday gift when he was promoted to captain in January 1944. Although busily preparing for another deployment, he married his second cousin Adele that spring.

With the kamikaze crisis of late 1944, VMF-213 was selected to reinforce a carrier air group. The "Hell Hawks" went to Hawaii under Maj Don Frame, arriving at Ulithi anchorage on Christmas Day. In company with VMF-124, they boarded *Essex* before year end. January 1945 operations included the Philippines, Formosa and French Indochina. The two-day Tokyo strikes presented Thomas with his only chances to score as a carrier pilot. Capping Tenryu airfield on February 16, he bested two "Zekes" and shared a probable. The next day he got snap shots at a brace of "Oscars", hitting both, but they evaded. Subsequent operations included supporting Marines ashore on Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Maj Dave Marshall took the squadron to Santa Barbara in March, where Thomas completed his productive time with the "Hell Hawks".

That summer Thomas was assigned to the US Navy's "Victory Squadron," flying carrier aircraft plus a captured "Zeke" and "Kate", on the last war bond tour. Thomas flew one of two F7F Tigercats, suitably adorned with his victory flags. It was wonderful duty – flying low across America, buzzing towns and partying almost every night. One pilot recalled that a member of the squadron learned of his son's birth and celebrated with a glass of milk – "The only non-alcoholic drink I saw him take." Thomas continued flying the potent Tigercat. In January 1947, trying to get an F7F through bad weather, he flew into Old Saddleback Mountain in Orange County, California. MSgt M. W. Hopwood also was killed in the crash. Thomas was buried at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale.

In 1985 Thomas' hometown airport was renamed in his honor.

Gus Thomas received the Navy Cross, two DFCs and two Air Medals.

Capt Kenneth A. Walsh (22-2-1)

Born – Brooklyn, New York, November 24, 1916
Died – Santa Ana, California, July 30, 1998, aged 81

Ken Walsh was a man of varied interests. He enjoyed classical music and aerial combat, and ranked among the closest students of "the game" in the World War II generation.

Born in Brooklyn, Walsh enlisted in the US Marine Corps at the age of 17, expecting to begin pilot training out of boot camp. As he sardonically noted long after, "I was a pretty naïve kid!" After two years as an aviation mechanic and radioman, Pte Walsh was accepted as a trainee aviator. Receiving his wings in April 1937, he was shortly promoted to corporal. His status as an enlisted Aviation Pilot was a source of enduring pride. Walsh flew scout and observation aircraft for the next five years, logging "traps" on board *Ranger*, *Yorktown* and *Wasp*. His carrier background eventually earned him a rare position as a US Marine Corps LSO – a distinction he shared with Bob Galer.

A transition to fighters placed Walsh in VMF-121 flying F4F-3s at the time of Pearl Harbor. A technical sergeant in Maj Sam Jack's squadron, Walsh was flying in South Carolina on December 7, 1941, hastening cross-country to San Diego four days later. With considerable experience, Walsh was promoted to warrant officer (Marine Gunner) in

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May. As a fresh-minted second lieutenant he joined the newly established VMF-124 at Camp Kearney in September. It was a meeting of man and machine. Maj Bill Gise's unit was the first US Marine Corps F4U squadron, and the Corsair was inextricably linked with Walsh's career.

Ken always insisted he was "one of Vought's best customers." Days before the squadron flew up to Guadalcanal he ditched a Corsair after a high-altitude test on February 1. Engine failure proved a frequent headache until Pratt & Whitney solved the ignition problem around 30,000ft.

The squadron arrived at Guadalcanal on February 11, 1943 – two days after the island was declared secure. Walsh entered combat with nearly 1,700 pilot hours, a rarity. Ken Walsh put his skill and experience to good use. He claimed two "Zekes" and a "Val" in his first combat on April 1, as a triple set the pace for his later encounters. Almost six weeks later, on May 11, he splashed three "Zekes" east of the Russells to become the first Corsair ace. All of Walsh's subsequent combats occurred farther up the Solomons, with his first Bougainville encounter producing three more kills on June 5.

August proved the defining period in Walsh's career. He opened the month with two "Zekes" on the 12th, but it was a hard-fought combat as he crash-landed at Segi with battle damage. Walsh covered the Vella Lavella landings on the 15th. The fight began badly as his division was bounced by several "Zekes", but he chased down one. Then, alerted by the shipboard fighter director, he was put onto a formation of "Vals". Walsh splashed two but the Zero escort riddled his Corsair. He managed a dicey emergency landing at Munda with a leaking hydraulic system and a flat tire. The F4U was scrapped. Walsh dropped three more "Zekes" in his next two combats, then fought an epic battle off Vella Lavella on the 30th. He picked off four fighters before he went in the water, returning to base in the company of a P-39 pilot who had witnessed the fight.

Walsh returned home to wide acclaim. He was only the second Marine ace to achieve 20 victories, and the first F4U pilot awarded the Medal of Honor. He received the medal from President Roosevelt on February 8, 1944 – Walsh was promoted to the rank of captain that same day. Subsequently, he instructed at NAS Jacksonville, Florida, until assigned to VMF-222. Under Maj Roy Spurlock the "Flying Deuces" performed fighter-bomber missions in the Philippines from April to June 1945, then went to Okinawa with Maj Harold Harwood through VJ Day. Flying an F4U-4, Walsh scored his 21st victory by overtaking a "Zeke" on June 22. It was one of only three kills the squadron scored at Okinawa.

Postwar, Walsh endured Washington, D.C. duty from 1946 to 1949, fetching up at El Toro in time for the Korean War. With VMR-152, Capt Walsh flew transports in and out of Korea during 1950-51. He was promoted to major in April 1952, mainly serving on the East Coast as a maintenance officer until 1955. As a lieutenant colonel he returned to VMR-152 at El Toro. His last squadron tour was in VMR-352, also at El Toro, until late 1961. He retired out of MAG-37 in February 1962, completing 28 years on active duty.

Ken Walsh attended Marion Carl's memorial service in Oregon in June 1998. Less than a month later Ken died of a heart attack preparing to leave his Santa Ana, California, home for the national fly-in at Oshkosh, Wisconsin. He was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Ken Walsh received the Medal of Honor, seven DFCs and 15 Air Medals.

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MEDAL OF HONOR CITATIONS

Nine of the ten US Marine Corps aviators who received the Medal of Honor for World War II action were fighter pilots. Their citations are presented here without change, although some errors inevitably crept in. For instance, Boyington's Marine score is cited as 26 when actually he was credited with 22. In two cases – Bob Galer and Jeff DeBlanc – the original Navy Cross was rescinded so the award could be upgraded to the Medal of Honor.

Lt Col Harold J. Bauer

For extraordinary heroism and conspicuous courage as Squadron Commander of Marine Fighting Squadron TWO TWELVE in the South Pacific Area during the period May 10 to November 14, 1942. Volunteering to pilot a fighter plane in defense of our positions on Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, Lt Col Bauer participated in two air battles against enemy bombers and fighters outnumbering our force more than two-to-one, boldly engaged the enemy and destroyed one Japanese bomber in the engagement of September 28 and shot down four enemy fighter planes in flames on October 3, leaving a fifth smoking badly. After successfully leading 26 planes in the over-water ferry flight of more than 600 miles on October 16, Lt Col Bauer, while circling to land, sighted a squadron of enemy planes attacking the USS *McFarland*. Undaunted by the formidable opposition and with valor above and beyond the call of duty, he engaged the entire squadron and, although alone and his fuel supply nearly exhausted, fought his plane so brilliantly that four of the Japanese planes were destroyed before he was forced down by lack of fuel. His intrepid fighting spirit and distinctive ability as leader and an airman, exemplified in his splendid record of combat achievement, were vital in the successful operations in the South Pacific Area.

Harry S. Truman, May 11, 1946

Maj Gregory Boyington

For extraordinary heroism above and beyond the call of duty as Commanding Officer of Marine Fighting Squadron TWO FOURTEEN in action against enemy Japanese forces

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in Central Solomons Area from September 12, 1943 to January 3, 1944. Consistently outnumbered throughout successive hazardous flights over heavily defended hostile territory, Maj Boyington struck at the enemy with daring and courageous persistence, leading his squadron into combat with devastating results to Japanese shipping, shore installations and aerial forces. Resolute in his efforts to inflict crippling damage on the enemy, Maj Boyington led a formation of 24 fighters over Kahili on October 17, and, persistently circling the airdrome where 60 hostile aircraft were grounded, boldly challenged the Japanese to send up planes. Under his brilliant command, our fighters shot down 20 enemy craft in the ensuing action without the loss of a single ship. A superb airman and determined fighter against overwhelming odds, Maj Boyington personally destroyed 26 of the many Japanese planes shot down by his squadron and by his forceful leadership developed the combat readiness in his command which was a distinctive factor in the Allied aerial achievements in this vitally strategic area.

Harry S. Truman, October 4, 1945

1Lt Jefferson J. DeBlanc

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty as Leader of a Section of six Fighter Planes in Marine Fighting Squadron ONE HUNDRED TWELVE, during aerial operations against enemy Japanese forces off Kolombangara Island in the Solomons Group, January 31, 1943. Taking off with his section as escort for a strike force of dive-bombers and torpedo planes ordered to attack Japanese surface vessels, 1Lt DeBlanc led his flight directly to the target area where, at 14,000ft, our strike force encountered a large number of Japanese Zeroes protecting the enemy's surface craft. In company with the other fighters, 1Lt DeBlanc instantly engaged the hostile planes and aggressively countered their repeated attempts to drive off our bombers, persevering in his efforts to protect the diving planes and waging fierce combat until, picking up a call for assistance from the dive-bombers under attack by enemy floatplanes at 1,000ft, he broke off his engagement with the Zeroes, plunged into the formation of floatplanes and disrupted the savage attack, enabling our dive-bombers and torpedo planes to complete their runs on the Japanese surface disposition and to withdraw without further incident. Although his escort mission was fulfilled upon the safe retirement of the bombers, 1Lt DeBlanc courageously remained on the scene despite a rapidly diminishing fuel supply and, boldly challenging the enemy's superior number of floatplanes, fought a valiant battle against terrific odds, seizing the tactical advantage and striking repeatedly to destroy three of the hostile aircraft and to disperse the remainder. Prepared to maneuver his damaged plane back to base, he had climbed aloft and set his course when he discovered two Zeroes closing in behind. Undaunted, he opened fire and blasted both Zeroes from the sky in a short, bitterly fought action which resulted in such hopeless damage to his plane that he was forced to bail out at a perilously low altitude atop the trees on enemy-held Kolombangara. A gallant officer, a superb airman and an indomitable fighter, 1Lt DeBlanc had rendered decisive assistance during a critical

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stage of operations, and his unwavering fortitude in the face of overwhelming opposition reflects the highest credit upon himself and adds new luster to the traditions of the United States Naval Service.

Harry S. Truman, December 6, 1946

Capt Henry T. Elrod

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while attached to Marine Fighting Squadron TWO HUNDRED ELEVEN during action against enemy Japanese land, surface and aerial units at Wake Island, from December 8 to 23, 1941. Engaging vastly superior forces of enemy bombers and warships on December 9 and 12, Capt Elrod shot down two of a flight of 22 hostile planes and, executing repeated bombing and strafing runs at extremely low altitude and close range, succeeded in inflicting deadly damage upon a large Japanese vessel, thereby sinking the first major warship to be destroyed by small caliber bombs delivered from a fighter-type aircraft. When his plane was disabled by hostile fire and no other ships were operative, Capt Elrod assumed command of one flank of the line set up in defiance of the enemy landing and conducting a brilliant defense, enabled his men to hold their positions and repulse determined Japanese attacks, repeatedly proceeding through intense hostile fusillades to provide covering fire for unarmed ammunition carriers. Capturing an automatic weapon during one enemy rush in force, he gave his own firearm to one of his men and fought on vigorously against the Japanese. Responsible in a large measure of the strength of his sector's gallant resistance, on December 23 Capt Elrod led his men with bold aggressiveness until he fell, mortally wounded. His superb skill as a pilot, daring leadership and unswerving devotion to duty distinguished him among the defenders of Wake Island, and his valiant conduct reflects the highest credit upon himself and the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country.

Harry S. Truman, November 8, 1946

Capt Joseph J. Foss

For outstanding heroism and courage above and beyond the call of duty as Executive Officer of a Marine Fighting Squadron, at Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands. Engaging in almost daily combat with the enemy from October 9 to November 19, 1942, Capt Foss personally shot down 23 Japanese aircraft and damaged others so severely that their destruction was extremely probable. In addition, during this period, he successfully led a large number of escort missions, skillfully covering reconnaissance, bombing and photographic planes as well as surface craft. On January 15, 1943 he added three more enemy aircraft to his already brilliant successes for a record of aerial combat achievement unsurpassed in this war. Boldly searching out an approaching enemy force on January 25, Capt Foss led his eight F4F Marine planes and four Army P-38s into action and, undaunted by tremendously superior numbers, intercepted and struck with such force that four

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Japanese fighters were shot down and the bombers were turned back without releasing a single bomb. His remarkable flying skill, inspiring leadership and indomitable fighting spirit were distinctive factors in the defense of strategic American positions on Guadalcanal.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, May 18, 1943

Maj Robert E. Galer

For conspicuous heroism and courage above and beyond the call of duty as leader of a marine fighter squadron in aerial combat with enemy Japanese forces in the Solomon Islands area. Leading his squadron repeatedly in daring and aggressive raids against Japanese aerial forces, vastly superior in numbers, Maj. Galer availed himself of every favorable attack opportunity, individually shooting down 11 enemy bomber and fighter aircraft over a period of 29 days. Though suffering the extreme physical strain attendant upon protracted fighter operations at an altitude above 25,000ft, the squadron under his zealous and inspiring leadership shot down a total of 27 Japanese planes. His superb airmanship, his outstanding skill and personal valor reflect great credit upon Maj Galer's gallant fighting spirit and upon the US Naval Service.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, March 24, 1943

Maj John L. Smith

For conspicuous gallantry and heroic achievement in aerial combat above and beyond the call of duty as Commanding Officer of Marine Fighting Squadron TWO TWENTY-THREE during operations against enemy Japanese forces in the Solomon Islands Area, August-September 1942. Repeatedly risking his life in aggressive and daring attacks, Maj Smith led his squadron against a determined force, greatly superior in numbers, personally shooting down 16 Japanese planes between August 21 and September 15, 1942. In spite of the limited combat experience of many of the pilots of this squadron, they achieved the notable record of a total of 83 enemy aircraft destroyed in this period, mainly attributable to the thorough training under Maj Smith and to his intrepid and inspiring leadership. His bold tactics and indomitable fighting spirit and the valiant and zealous fortitude of the men of his command not only rendered the enemy's attacks ineffective and costly to them, but contributed to the security of our advance base. His loyal and courageous devotion to duty sustain and enhance the finest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, February 24, 1943

1Lt James E. Swett

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty, as a division leader in Marine Fighting Squadron TWO TWENTY-ONE in action against enemy Japanese aerial forces in the Solomon Islands Area, April 7, 1943.

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In a daring flight to intercept a wave of 150 Japanese planes, 1Lt Swett unhesitatingly hurled his four-plane division into action against a formation of 15 enemy bombers and during his dive personally exploded three hostile planes in mid-air with accurate and deadly fire. Although separated from his division while clearing the heavy concentration of anti-aircraft fire, he boldly attacked six enemy bombers, engaged the first four in turn, and unaided, shot them down in flames. Exhausting his ammunition as he closed on the fifth Japanese bomber, he relentlessly drove his attack against terrific opposition which partially disabled his engine, shattered the windscreen and slashed his face. In spite of this, he brought his battered plane down with skillful precision in the water off Tulagi without further injury. The superb airmanship and tenacious fighting spirit which enabled 1Lt Swett to destroy eight enemy bombers in a single flight were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, October 9, 1943
(Presented on Guadalcanal by Maj Gen Ralph J. Mitchell, commanding US Marine Corps aviation in the South Pacific)

1Lt Kenneth A. Walsh

For extraordinary heroism and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty as a pilot in Marine Fighting Squadron ONE TWENTY-FOUR in aerial combat against enemy Japanese forces in the Solomon Islands area. Determined to thwart the enemy's attempt to bomb Allied ground forces and shipping at Vella Lavella on August 15, 1943, 1Lt Walsh repeatedly dived his plane into an enemy formation outnumbering his own division six-to-one and, although his plane was hit numerous times, shot down two Japanese dive-bombers and one fighter. After developing engine trouble on August 30 during a vital escort mission, 1Lt Walsh landed his mechanically disabled plane at Munda, quickly replaced it with another, and proceeded to rejoin his flight over Kahili. Separated from his escort group when he encountered approximately 50 Japanese Zeroes, he unhesitatingly attacked, striking with relentless fury in his lone battle against a powerful force. He destroyed four hostile fighters before cannon shellfire forced him to make a dead-stick landing off Vella Lavella where he was later picked up. His valiant leadership and his daring skill as a flier served as a source of confidence and inspiration to his fellow pilots and reflect the highest credit upon the US Naval Service.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, February 8, 1944

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WHO IS THE LEADING MARINE ACE?

The title of leading US Marine Corps ace has been a subject of study and controversy since January 3, 1944. It need not be.

During 1942 three pilots held the record as the top-scoring US Marine Corps fighter pilot – Marion Carl, the Corps' first ace; John L. Smith; and Joe Foss (see the appendix for details). Foss with 26 victories held the US Marine Corps and American record from January 1943, but the subject became confused when Greg Boyington's controversial claims with the AVG were added to his reputed victories as a Marine aviator in 1943-44. This much is certain – Joe Foss was credited with 26 victories in aerial combat, all of them as a Marine. But when Boyington returned to the US in 1942 he claimed six aerial victories with the "Flying Tigers" – a figure naively or foolishly accepted by Headquarters Marine Corps, depending upon one's perspective.

On January 3, 1944 Boyington, eager to pass Foss' record, led a fighter sweep to Rabaul. At the time he was credited with 19 victories in US Marine Corps service which, combined with his alleged six in the AVG, put him within one of Foss. He bounced a formation of Zeroes, and in the ensuing combat downed one before his wingman was killed. Boyington was shot down and captured, remaining a prisoner until the war ended in 1945.

Back in Washington, D.C., to receive the Medal of Honor (originally thought to have been awarded posthumously), Boyington went to Headquarters with VMF-214's former intelligence officer, Frank Walton. The process was described by squadron historian Bruce Gamble in his 2000 Boyington biography, *Black Sheep One*. Gamble revealed that Boyington and Walton inserted an "after action report" in the "Black Sheep" war diary stating that Boyington had destroyed three "Zekes" rather than the one witnessed before being shot down himself. Thus, Boyington's wartime total was raised to 28 victories, including 22 as a Marine.

The process appeared non-regulation, conducted by a national hero with an ambitious personal agenda and a former intelligence officer who had no supporting documents or

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witnesses. Beyond that, the current squadron commander, Guadalcanal ace George Hollowell, had no knowledge of the Washington, D.C. maneuvering, as VMF-214 was then at El Centro. No matter. Headquarters was more than willing to accept the situation with a perceived public relations advantage. Nonetheless, ample room for doubt remained. Even accepting Boyington's triple claim on his last mission, his Marine score still fell four short of Foss'. A semantic dilemma arose – what was the meaning of the phrase "top US Marine Corps ace"? Was it most victories scored as a Marine or most victories claimed by a pilot who had flown in the US Marine Corps? The organization devoutly did not want to discuss the issue.

Only in the 1980s were the facts of Boyington's China claims revealed by researcher Dr Frank Olynyk, later official historian of the American Fighter Aces Association. In searching AVG records he found only two confirmations for Boyington in air-to-air combat. Thus, "Pappy's" career total was 24 rather than 28, and the aces association accepted the lower figure, which many students still consider generous. Nevertheless, the Corps continued lauding Boyington as its top gun.

At least two efforts have been made to convince the US Marine Corps to alter its stance regarding the ace of aces to reflect reality. After Boyington died in 1988 Marion Carl approached Brig Gen Edwin H. Simmons of the US Marine Corps History and Museums Branch, stating irrefutably that Joe Foss had downed more planes as a Marine than Boyington. Simmons dismissed the notion, saying, "We don't speak ill of the dead." Carl's repost that speaking factually was in no way speaking ill made no headway.

Joe Foss was too much of a gentleman to make an issue of the dispute. But after his death in 2003 friends and admirers launched another effort. One of the speakers at Foss' memorial service in Scottsdale, Arizona, was the assistant commandant, Gen William L. Nyland, a Naval Flight Officer who described himself as a friend of the family. A letter writing campaign to Nyland on Foss' behalf produced no results, as Nyland lateraled the correspondence to a civilian employee of the History and Museums Division. The response stated that both Boyington and Foss had made contributions to US Marine Corps aviation and their service should be honored equally, and "yadda-yadda".

At the heart of the matter is the institutional inability of the US Marine Corps to admit two mistakes – accepting Boyington's AVG record based only on his dubious assertion in 1942, and accepting his non-regulation "confirmation" of two unobserved victories when he returned in 1945.

Whatever the flaws of the US Marine Corps as an institution, one fact is unassailable. There is only one leatherneck top gun, and his name is Joe Foss.

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THE COMBAT STRATEGY AND TACTICS OF MAJ GREGORY BOYINGTON

Despite his boozing, brawling reputation, Greg Boyington was a close student of his profession. This document, created by Boyington, was completed by VMF-214 in mid January 1944 and issued by the US Navy Department's Air Intelligence Group on February 15, six weeks after the ace had been listed as missing in action.

General Observations Applying to All Missions

1. Tactics in the air should be studied and developed in comparison with time-tried tactics on the land and on the sea. The principles of scouting, out-flanking, ambushing, etc., all provide a basis for the development of air tactics. Of course allowances and modifications must be made for our speed, for the additional dimension in which we operate, etc. But land and sea experience provide a starting point.
2. Fighter aircraft are designed, and fighter pilots are trained, to fight. If there are enemy aircraft in the air, and contact is not made, something is wrong. The only exception to this are those situations where we must stay close to something we are expected to protect; where to attack means that we have been lured away.
3. All missions must be preceded by thorough planning and briefing, with respect to the purpose of the mission and the purpose of any alternate missions, with respect to the rendezvous point and any alternate rendezvous points, etc. All possible contingencies must be considered in advance, particularly because all of our present operations are

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over enemy territory far from our bases. Success in the air is a lot of little things. Most of them can be taken care of before takeoff.

4. All missions must be flown as planned and briefed unless there is real justification to the contrary – there must be discipline. Along with realizing the purpose of the mission, each pilot must realize fully his responsibility for its successful execution.
5. With proper planning and briefing, no use of the radio should be necessary except in emergencies and except in situations where tactical considerations require otherwise.
6. Every effort must be made to obtain relevant weather information and to make intelligent use of such information.
7. All fighters must realize the critical importance of recognition, in order to distinguish our planes from those of the enemy, in order to identify the enemy's different types so that his particular points of weakness can be exploited and his particular points of strength respected, etc.
8. Fighters must not go into combat feeling that the division leader or at most the section leader will answer for problems of tactics, navigation communications, etc. In these regards leaders and wingmen are the same – at any moment the customary leader may go down or may be required to return to base, or may become lost, or may be without a radio, and every one of the others must be ready to take over. And in particular, all pilots are equally responsible for spotting the enemy and for initiating immediate action either through their leader or by taking over the lead themselves.
9. Pilots must make steady, careful, observation a habit. They must have a system and a routine for scanning the air both above and below, behind, on the flanks and ahead. The vigil must be unceasing.
10. When bogies are called, the call must be so worded that everyone will know the location of the division from which the call has come, and the location of the bogies either with respect to a geographical landmark or with respect to the line of flight of the friendly force.
11. Surface bogies should not be called unless it is practically certain that they are enemy bogies. The comparative slowness of movement of friendly forces on the water makes any revelation of their presence or position undesirable.
12. In the execution of all missions, all advantages of sun, weather, terrain, etc., must be exploited.
13. In danger areas high speed must be maintained. In the less dangerous areas, such a speed must be carried that all formations can stay together comfortably.
14. We must not climb into bogies. We must gain our altitude away in a position from which the action can be observed, and our climb must be made with a high forward air speed.
15. We must not pull up when closely and dangerously attacked. Speed is our defense. With moderate loss of altitude and certainly without going all the way to the water and running for home, the enemy can be outdistanced, and then altitude and position recovered for further attacks.
16. Close attention must be given to the efficiency of our firepower. Our guns' loading, their boresighting, their cleanliness and their general performance at altitude, as well as at the lower levels, must be perfect. As a result of tests of the comparative destructive

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power of tracer, armor piercing and incendiary ammunition, our squadron changed its belting from 1-1-1 to two incendiary, one armor piercing, two incendiary and one tracer. In actual combat we found this load much more satisfactory. We also found it desirable to use the ring sight entirely in determining range and establishing lead, using the tracer merely to check the boresighting.

17. It must be remembered that with our armor plate, our self-sealing or purged fuel tanks, and with proper evasive action, our rear vulnerability is not great.
18. On the other hand, it is apparent that our most successful runs against fighter opposition are from eleven to one o'clock ahead and from five to seven o'clock astern, from a level just above to a level just below.
19. The most common maneuver of the Jap fighter at present is a split-S, which happens usually when he is approached from ahead or from astern. In normal combat, if he cannot be hit before he has started down, he is usually gone.
20. In normal combat in enemy territory it is not desirable, particularly for a single plane, to go below a base altitude, which might well be 10,000ft. To go lower with a section of two planes may be desirable if both planes carry ample speed and are prepared to cover each other when necessary.
21. In normal combat, clouds may provide cover either for us or for the enemy, and must be considered constantly in both connections.
22. All squadrons must keep the white star on their insignia freshly painted. Cleaning of the fuselage causes them to become indistinct in a matter of days.
23. In all missions involving layers of aircraft stacked up through considerable airspace, all must remember the difficulty of maintaining visual contact through all the layers.
24. All pilots must check their oxygen equipment (as well as everything else) thoroughly before takeoff. To return to base early for oxygen reasons can hardly indicate anything less than negligence in preparation for the flight.
25. When a pilot decides that for some reason he must return to base, he should make a visual sign to the other member of his section that he must do so, and should also indicate by visual signal whether he is able to go back alone.
26. When a plane drops out, the other member of the section should join up on some other single plane, if any is available. A one-plane section is about as useless as a three-plane section.
27. Jap fighters approaching from angles ahead will usually turn away at the suggestion of a run on them, or at any other suggestion that we mean business.
28. Fighters must hold their fire until within range, as indicated by the size of the target in the ring sight. Otherwise, the Jap will be warned by that first over-anxious burst, will split-S and will be gone. On the other hand fire should be opened sooner in a head-on run because then we are closing faster and because the plane opening fire last usually turns away first and is a good target during that run.

Fighter Sweeps

29. The larger a striking force, the greater its power, provided that it is not so large as to be unmanageable. At the present time it would seem desirable to restrict sweeps to 36 to 48 planes, upon the assumption of course that all or very nearly all of them will

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continue to the target and will participate in the action. Later on the tactics of such sweeps may reach such development that larger forces can be handled efficiently.

30. On each particular sweep the number of squadrons represented should be as small as possible – i.e. each squadron that does participate should have a large number of planes.
31. On each particular sweep the number of different types of fighters participating should be as small as possible.
32. The leader must fly in a position where he can be seen and followed easily. At the present time enemy patrols are not ordinarily airborne, or at least are not at altitude, before our arrival. Such being the case the sweep leader can fly satisfactorily in the bottom layer, with the upper layers stepped back from his layer. However, if enemy patrols should be at altitude, it would be better for the sweep leader to be in the uppermost layer. On some sweeps the leader has led the middle layer. By and large, therefore, the sweep leader should be at that level where it is expected that the first contact will be made.
33. The fighting should be kept in the same part of the air. It should not degenerate into a number of small fights, some going in our favor and some going otherwise, with some planes out of the action altogether.
34. After the initial contact it is hardly possible to keep a division together, although it would be desirable if it could be done without throwing the division into a tail chase with only the leader doing any good. A section is a thoroughly satisfactory combat unit, and can be kept together much more easily than a division. Every effort should be made to keep the section together, but the wingman should not be simply chasing his leader. If the efforts to keep together fail, the separated planes should join up as soon as possible on other friendly planes.
35. A rally point should be designated beforehand for all planes on the sweep. If for any reason this is not done, those planes from any one squadron should have their own rally point. The rally point should be at a certain altitude, not too far removed from the probable center of action and preferably into the sun.
36. Our fighters must keep in the fight for the time specified unless lack of fuel, lack of oxygen or some other good reason require otherwise.

Bomber Escorts

37. The responsibility for the success of a bombing mission rests partly upon the bombers and partly upon their escort. When the bombers do a good job they, aside from hitting their target, do the following. They keep good formation, with all units massed as closely as practicable. They select courses that will allow sufficient clear airspace above the bombers for the fighters to maintain visual contact. They select courses avoiding anti-aircraft fire as much as possible. They use imagination in varying their times of attack, their altitudes of attack, their courses of approach and retirement, etc. They carry sufficient airspeed for the fighters to stay together comfortably during the non-dangerous part of the approach and retirement, as well as during the dangerous part.
38. The layers of fighter cover are ordinarily roving high, high, medium, low and close. On the approach all layers will tend to lean ahead of the bombers – on the retirement

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they will be over the bombers. The higher the particular layer, the farther sideways its coverage should extend.

39. The roving high cover should fly as high as possible, consistent with good visual contact with the bombers and not more than a 10,000ft spread, but not at more than 30,000ft. It should fly well ahead of the bombers on the approach and ordinarily behind them on retirement. Its mission is the engagement and annihilation of enemy interceptors operating anywhere, but particularly at the upper levels. It may leave the airspace over the bombers if that is necessary for the performance of its mission. It is a free unit.
40. The high and medium covers are ordinarily the second and third highest covers. Their positions are respectively about 6,000ft and 4,000ft above the bombers. Unlike the roving high cover, the high cover is not authorized to leave the airspace above the bombers.
41. The fighters' airspeed should be considerably greater than that of the bombers, for the safety of the fighters as well as for their great maneuverability. As a result they must weave, in order to keep their assigned positions. The low and close covers will weave back and forth over the bombers' line of flight. The other covers ordinarily will put half of their strength on each side of the line of flight, each half then keeping to its side of the line of flight.
42. The low and close covers are respectively 2,000ft to 1,500ft and 100ft to 500ft above the bombers. They must hold those positions at all costs.
43. When the bombers are SBDs and TBFs, which usually approach in that order and a mile or a mile-and-a-half apart, the low and close covers must go down with the bombers, leveling off at about 5,000ft and 2,000ft, respectively. The upper layers must settle down proportionately.
44. Ordinarily, the low cover must see that straggling bombers are covered.
45. It is desirable for the bombers to open up on the radio if the fighter cover is inadequate at any particular point – i.e. someone in the bomber force should act as a fighter director or fire control officer. The fighters are often innocently unaware of enemy pressure at some particular point.
46. Fighter divisions should be able to keep together and fighter sections must keep together. The lower the layer in which a particular fighter happens to fly, the more vulnerable his position and the more prepared he must be to operate defensively with his section.
47. No fighter straggling can be permitted, on the part of single planes, sections or even divisions. Fighters in real trouble should dive under the bombers.
48. A bomber strike should be preceded by a fighter sweep, timed to arrive at the target at least half-an-hour before the bombers.

Strafing

49. The importance of thorough planning and briefing is particularly great in strafing. Every scrap of knowledge with regard to terrain, vulnerability of targets, location of anti-aircraft defenses, etc. must be utilized. Each pilot must know exactly what his approach will be and where his targets will be found.

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50. Probably no target is invulnerable to successful strafing. But strafing missions cannot be run off under just any circumstances. Surprise is absolutely essential. All cover of weather, darkness, etc. must be utilized. A mission that has succeeded largely because the attack was not expected certainly cannot be repeated immediately.
51. Strafing restrictions issued by the intelligence and operations authorities must be strictly observed. But in the unrestricted areas there should be no hesitation or delay in destroying enemy targets that present themselves. Something which is wide open can be gone the next.
52. We in the air sometimes fail to appreciate the effect of strafing upon enemy morale. We know the actual physical destruction which .50 caliber guns can cause, but we sometimes forget the amount of less tangible damage that those guns can inflict. Often such a target as a bivouac area in a coconut plantation cannot be seen but strafing of such targets has inestimable value.
53. High-speed runs are essential. Speed will reduce the number of rounds that can be delivered and will diminish the opportunity for observation, but it must be maintained. Ordinarily, each plane should make but one run – if more firepower is desired the number of planes should be increased.
54. Particularly if the approach is made in line or in a flat echelon, the last mile or two of the approach should be made at a constant power setting so that all pilots will be able to devote full attention to the target. Any pilots who unconsciously jam on the throttle just before reaching the target will run the risk of entering the fire of the other planes and of colliding with those planes later in their attempts to get back into position.
55. Strafing must not be done in column. The greatest safety factor is achieved with a line or flat echelon. If the target is so small that all planes cannot get their guns to bear from a line or flat echelon, they should approach from different angles, attacking as simultaneously as possible.
56. The approach must be as low as possible, with a momentary pull-up just before reaching the target, for the purpose of identifying the particular targets and getting the guns to bear.
57. An impulse to fire too early must be restrained. For effectiveness and for saving gun barrels, fire should be held until one is definitely within range.
58. The retirement must be low and very fast, with an eye for possible water spouts from heavy fire.
59. Upon the word to "Scramble", it is important to get the fighters off the ground, and only second to get them joined up in their usual order. Any four planes can make a division if the takeoff has been mixed up. And if the takeoffs are unduly delayed, any two planes should proceed together as soon as possible. Planes should never proceed singly.
60. Since fighter direction by radio is never perfect, due to failures of radar, the adversities of weather, etc., it may be possible to locate the enemy only if our planes operate as a scouting force – i.e. it may be necessary to break the interception force into smaller units such as divisions, which should keep each other in sight but should make their coverage as wide as possible. Of course upon establishment of contact the force should be reunited. It should be exactly like locating the enemy in operations upon land or sea.

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61. When an enemy force is approaching and the fighters go out, some of them should be required to remain over the area or object in danger of attack, in case the interception is not a complete success.
62. When it is expected that bombers are included among the approaching bogies, our interceptors should have as little as possible to do with enemy fighters. In such a case our mission is to prevent those bombers from doing any damage with their bombs. This means that the bombers must be located, and shot down, or at least their formation must be broken up and the individual bombers forced to jettison their bombs.

Patrols, Including Dumbo and Task Force Covers

63. Too often, fighters consider patrols and Dumbo and task force covers a waste of time. However, along with performing the mission properly, the time involved can be utilized to good effect. Wingmen can develop their formation flying, making it perfect but effortless. Leaders can exchange the lead with their wingmen to see how well the wingmen can lead and to see how well they themselves can fly wing. Divisions can perfect their teamwork and section maneuvers by practicing tight turns, violent scissors, etc. Leaders can select patterns for flight, the basis of which will be readily apparent to those following them, so that a minimum of concentration will be necessary in keeping the planes together. All pilots can practice their own systems of observation, particularly in focusing upon very distant objects. In the case of a Dumbo cover, the fighters can fly as if escorting bombers. Quite frequently, upon completion of the mission, the divisions can go into tail chases, which will release energy and improve technique. The average tour of combat duty involves too much straight and level flying. As much altitude should be held as is consistent with good visual contact with the object or area being covered. The position should be into the sun and generally between the object or area being covered and the enemy's territory.

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WARTIME INTERVIEW WITH CAPT J. J. FOSS

Capt J. J. Foss
Executive Officer, VMF-121
Interviewed in the
Bureau of Aeronautics

April 26, 1943
Capt Foss tells of his experiences as a fighter pilot on Guadalcanal. In his narrative he discusses among other topics Jap and US air tactics, attacks on convoys, the P-38, strafing, gun-spread on planes, ammunition combinations, gunnery, floatplanes, oxygen, radio and Jap pilots.

Distribution: *To all units ashore and afloat concerned with aircraft*

Guadalcanal – Jap Tactics

I went into Guadalcanal in VMF-121. Maj "Duke" Davis was Commanding Officer and I was the Exec. We flew off a converted carrier, about 350 miles off Guadalcanal, arriving October 9. Our second day there, we started air operations.

At that time the Jap attacks were with the Type-1 high altitude bomber, coming in in formations of from 27 up to 35 with fighter escort at altitudes from 22,000ft to 26,000ft. They would send down a fighter sweep before the bombing attack. About 12 Zeroes would arrive 30 to 45 minutes ahead of the bombers, apparently to draw up all our fighters to start an engagement. About the time an engagement started the second wave of Zeroes would come in. They always came in at high altitude, somewhere about 30,000ft. By the time they arrived, they were hoping you were down at a good low altitude where they could work on you.

The first outfit that came in would always spar around – they wanted to draw you down so that the high altitude boys could get a good pass at you. Once of that was enough to cure me, and everyone in our outfit. We went in to get something that looked like easy

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bait and as we started in the Zeroes that were above us came down on us. They had a little bit too much speed to do much damage. They didn't shoot down many, but they hit just about all of us. So whenever we'd see about six Jap planes that seemed to want to engage us, we were quite sure they had plenty of high cover. If the fighting was on even terms, they weren't at all anxious to engage us. But whenever they had the long end of the deal, they were anxious to engage.

Along with the bombers, there would be six to eight more Zeroes. They'd fly to the rear and above, about 3000ft above the bombers, doing loops and slow rolls, to slow them down so they could stay with the bombers. They were usually up around 30,000ft. Then there were another six just prowling around. You never could tell where they were; they would circle wide and try to come in from the opposite direction.

When I got there, we seemed to be getting off late. The Japs got wise to the fact that if they made a circle and came in over the mountains we couldn't pick them up on the radar as soon as we used to when they came right down the channel. With the mountain interference on the radar we hadn't quite enough warning to make it up there. On several occasions I reached the same altitude as the bombers – a bad situation. We didn't have time to climb into a position to get a pass at the bombers.

Sometimes my outfit made a parallel run to the bombing formation but couldn't gain a bit on them – we stayed right there just out of range. Their gunners would be shooting at us while the Zeroes stayed up and didn't seem to want to come down. Finally they could come down, and then we'd get to fight the Zeroes. One reason why my squadron had lots of Zeroes to its credit is that we always wanted to get into a scrap. When there was nothing else around, we always went after the Zeroes, if they didn't come after us.

US Tactics

Instead of scrambling all the fighters on the first warning, we would send up one flight of eight to twelve planes just to spar around with these first fighters. They would circle around for a long time before they would engage – they never pressed the attack. We were just trying to hold off 'till we could get some more fighters with plenty of oxygen and gas up there in time for the bombers. We always got at least eight planes to the bombers.

At that time we were allowed 40 F4Fs on the field, about 30 of which were operating. Out of these 30, we could guarantee to have 24 in the air.

The P-38s didn't arrive until late in October. The day they arrived was the last time that the Japs came in with their big formations for high altitude bombing.

Until October 25 we had air combat every day, sometimes two and three times a day. On October 25 we knocked down 17 Zeroes and five bombers. That attack was the last that came into the field. Every day we picked them up on the radar. They'd come down to within 40 miles of the field and orbit. We covered the field and went out in their direction far enough to intercept them if they came in. That went on for about a week. After that we decided to see what was out farther. As soon as we'd start out, they'd evidently see us coming and turn around, for our control would call us and say they were departing. This went on until November 12, when the Jap battleships came down, and we had a fleet engagement through the 15th. During that engagement the Jap dive-bombers came down a couple of times. Our boys intercepted them and cleaned out just about the whole formation.

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Destroying a Convoy

Then they brought a convoy down the channel consisting of eight transports and four cargo ships covered by nine destroyers and three light cruisers. When they were at this end of New Georgia Island, the *Enterprise* group came in to help us. After we hit them the first time the warships turned around and left their cargo and transport ships to fight it out for themselves, with very light Zero coverage. That was the end of that outfit. The four cargo ships got through that day, because we went after the transports first. The cargo ships arrived at Guadalcanal the next morning – the 15th. I took off just at daylight and spotted them as they were coming around Savo Island. I went on up the channel and when I came back, three of them were in flames. Then we strafed the beach, and the fourth one couldn't unload anything. A P-39 dropped a bomb right in the hold and an SBD dropped another one. That ship was evidently loaded with oil. It was the end of the four cargo ships.

Changes

I left Guadalcanal on November 17. On January 1, 1943 I came back and found that things had changed. They now had course rules around the field and MPs – enemy action was very erratic. We flew a lot of patrols over the ships in the channel. We were bringing in a lot of supplies. We made fighter sweeps up over Munda and Rekata Bay and once in a while saw a Jap cargo ship, accompanied usually by one or two destroyers, coming down the channel headed for Munda. They would try to leave Bougainville late enough in the day to be coming into our range just at dark. If we came out to intercept them, we had to come back to the field after dark. Usually the weather was really bad up that way – there were squalls almost every day all along the line. It was really a workout to get back.

Then part of our fleet force went up and shelled Munda. While they were en route, we covered them until darkness. Then the next morning we picked them up at daylight and flew fighter coverage over them. We had only four Grummans to cover them but didn't think it too few at the time. Coming back, I was the first one out at daylight and didn't see a thing for three hours. Just after I had been relieved by the other half of my flight, eight dive-bombers, which had evidently been watching, came in. My four boys jumped in, shot down five of the dive-bombers, and put two more smoking.

Bluff

By that time my boys were out of ammunition and decided to circle around the ships to get a little protection from their AA fire. But the ships chased them out of there. Then 12 Zeroes jumped in (we were about 65 to 70 miles from Guadalcanal at the time). There was a smart chap leading who told the boys to move up on line. The four of them got in line. Then as soon as one of the Zeroes peeled off and came down for an attack, the chap on the opposite end just buzzed up and started a head-on run at the Jap as he came down. The Jap would pull right up and give it up. One of my boys who had pulled up at him would slide into the middle of the formation. Then they'd just keep shifting back and forth. The Japs chased them all the way to Guadalcanal, where one of the Zeroes burst into flames and flew into the water. Our boys didn't have a bean left in their guns.

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Combat Tactics

On January 15 we went to get an AK [cargo ship], evidently coming to Kolombangara or to Munda, accompanied by one destroyer. It was about 15 minutes before dark when we arrived. There were 11 dive-bombers, eight Grummans and eight P-39s. We had four Grummans at 18,000ft (that was I), four Grummans at 16,000ft and eight P-39s lower – the dive-bombers were at about 12,000ft. It was so dark that if I had been any higher I couldn't have seen the dive-bombers. We kept crossing back and forth so that we'd loop behind the others and cover their tails.

Just as the first dive-bombers started in, the Zeroes jumped in and attacked the P-39s at low altitude, about 14,000ft. Then the four-plane section of Grummans, which were at 16,000ft, dived in and rescued the P-39s. They shot down four of five Japs. I didn't dare go down because I saw six Zeroes at my altitude just waiting for me to go down. I just stayed up and circled around trying to get a shot at them. Finally they moved in and started making a pass on me. By this time we'd gone past our range and didn't dare use full throttle or we'd have run out of gas before we got home.

As the Zeroes went back to re-form and came back for a second time, we slid into a cloud and got away from them. Everyone got home, with the exception of one of my four who had a head-on collision with a Zero. When we got back to Guadalcanal, I had less than ten gallons of gasoline left. One of my wingmen ran out of gas taxiing off the runway, so we had a pretty close run on fuel.

After that, there weren't any Jap ships coming down the channel in daylight hours. They'd always start from the far end of Bougainville and be out of our range by morning, though we made sweeps every morning.

About noon on January 25 or 26 a bogey was picked up, and one flight was scrambled, along with four P-38s, which climbed up and hit the ceiling at 18,000ft. There, they circled around, and waited for the bogey to move in. Over Savo Island we spotted our first planes – about 12 Zeroes. I gave the command to move in and see what was there. As we got out toward the Zeroes, I came to a big gap in the clouds and decided to take a short look above to see what was up there – I saw plenty! There were above 20 more Zeroes up there, and in back of those, about 20 more dive-bombers! They wanted us to go on out and attack the Zeroes over Savo Island. Then those boys would call and say, "They're out here now – go on in and take the field". We just circled between the field and Savo Island, under the clouds, and they just kept sparring around but didn't attack us.

They sent bait in within 2,000 or 3,000ft directly below us – they pulled right in front so we'd make a run on them. I just called and told everyone to stay in formation. The P-38s were flying on the opposite side of a large circle – we covered each other's tails. Finally two of the Zeroes decided they were going to get some action. They met us, head-on, a little off to the side so we'd swing over at them. But we didn't – we just passed them about 100 yards off. They decided to swing around to get on our tails, failing to notice that the P-38s were following. They pulled in front of the P-38s – that was the end of those two birds.

We sparred around there for about an hour. In the meantime all airplanes came up – had 16 more Grummans, eight P-40s and two more P-38s. The Japs turned around and went home with their big outfits. They'd lost five in the deal and hadn't fired a shot.

I left on the last day of January.

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The P-38

Q – What was your impression of the P-38?
A – The P-38 is really a good plane as an interceptor above 20,000ft. If you get notice that a bogey is coming in, and don't have much time, give it to the P-38s – they can really get up there. If it's above 20,000ft they make their runs, go on out far enough to make a turn and come back for another run, When the P-38s were sparring around with me, they would buzz way down below me, take a look, then go up through a hole in the clouds, take a short look around and come back down. They ran all around the sky while I was doing my best just to stay where I was.

Q – Was any attempt made to use them at the limit of their range?
A – They went clear up to Bougainville. They sent P-38s to fly cover on B-17s and on B-24s. There would be Zeroes above them, and below them would be more Zeroes, float biplanes and float Zeroes, but their orders were to stay in formation with the bombers. If any of the enemy fighters made an attack, they'd just pull up, give a short burst and the enemy fighter would pull right back up out of range. When the P-38s failed to do this one day, three of them were shot down. They went down below 20,000ft to get some "easy meat" (these float biplanes that can turn on a dime) and tried to dogfight – that was the end of three P-38s.

Strafing

Q – Did you do much strafing on enemy ships?
A – Yes. When we first came, they said there wouldn't be much strafing of enemy ships. I thought I'd start out on canoes or something easy, but our first assignment was some transport ships. Before we went out (I was going out in another formation just to get the idea), the leader said, "Now I don't like to go down close, but you just follow me." When we got out there, there were four or five cargo ships and nine destroyers. We went right on down. I don't know how he missed the ship. That was my first indoctrination in strafing. We came in at about a 45-degree angle. There were plenty of AA bursts – too close for comfort – on that attack. From then on I was leading.

We went out again around October 13. There were six cargo and transport ships, with several destroyers covering them. The cargo ships were in column, with three destroyers on one side and four on the other. We were supposed to go in and strafe a cargo ship, but when we came out they spotted us. They all turned in different directions when I came in at the usual 45 degrees. I failed to look out for a destroyer over at the side, and she real1y packed them right into the middle of the flight. She didn't shoot anyone down, but on the way out one plane in another flight was shot down.

I didn't seem to have enough speed, so the next time I went out to strafe destroyers I came down at about 70 degrees and just made a tight spiral to keep my fire right on the decks. The boys came in a little from the side – none of us got shot down that trip.

The next time we went out to strafe a light cruiser off New Georgia. We lost one man out of eight on that deal.

On November 14 my flight had the pleasure of strafing a Jap battleship off Savo Island. The bad thing about that was that they had pompom guns on her, all forward of

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the big guns clear to the tip of the bow. They kept shooting even after we started sprinkling rounds right into the gun positions. Finally we shut them up. I couldn't tell you whether they were worked by indirect control – I never did see anyone there. I came right down, but I was looking at other things.

As far as strafing goes, you got a lot of it. Then strafing the fields – we made several attacks on Rekata Bay, where there was a seaplane base. There, we really did some good work. We'd get five or a dozen planes and set them on fire. We'd get the radio shack and things like that, or get a gas dump – start a few fires, etc. They had five or six AA guns there. And then their small arms fire was something fierce. There is a point at Rekata Bay with a little island right at the end it. Whenever you strafe that bay you come past this point, off the little island, where there is an AA position covered by small arms fire. Every time we went through there somebody got badly shot up, but we always had enough speed to go around the corner and make a forced landing down the coast. The boys usually get back, unless they have been killed in the plane.

While the field at Munda was being constructed we made several attacks on it. We strafed as many as a dozen planes there one day, started fires around the field and got some trucks. One time when we dropped in we surprised the men who were working on the runways. They cleared the field pretty well. The Japs kept moving in AA and three-inch stuff. The last time I went to Munda there looked to me to be around 12 big anti-aircraft positions located so that if you got in there you'd really have to pull a Houdini to get out. Their small stuff would light up the boundary of the field when they started shooting. Everybody that went in there got pretty well peppered.

They have a new destroyer, comparatively new, with AA guns. It resembles an *Atlanta* class cruiser in the shape of the turrets. When you come down on those babies, they light up like a Christmas tree. Just about everyone in the formations gets hit a few times.

Q – What was the highest altitude at which you operated?
A – The highest altitude that my outfit operated at was 31,000ft indicated. We could have used a few thousand more feet on several occasions. Our main trouble with the Grumman was that we couldn't get enough altitude in time. We liked to make overhead and high side runs – those were the only two runs that we ever used. Once in a while someone would use a head-on run. When we used the head-on run, we'd come out behind the Zeroes, where some of them had a clear shot at you.

Q – If you'd had planes with a good enough rate of climb, would you have used it up to 35,000 or 36,000ft?
A – Yes.

Q – What was the effect of the strafing on the ships?
A – Sometimes it'll start a fire on a cargo ship, and on the troop transports the decks are just packed with men. When you strafe the deck on a troop transport you really do some damage to personnel. When you strafe a destroyer that's the end of AA from that vessel if you're placing them good, up and down the deck. They'll stop shooting at you when you get to about 3,000ft.

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There were two destroyers that came in one afternoon in broad daylight around Savo Island, and they saw two of our little old corvettes. These two corvettes saw the destroyers coming and started on down the channel, trying to outrun them. The destroyers cut loose and had them well bracketed. When the little fellows saw there was no use trying to run, they just turned and headed straight towards the two destroyers, shooting full blast with their 3-inch guns. I'll swear that one was sinking – there was a squirt of water coming up – and they were still shooting at the Jap destroyer, All the men on the two corvettes were saved. Then we went out and strafed the Japs. After they cleared Savo Island, one of them exploded, caught on fire and sank. Then a little farther on the other one did the same thing. They gave the last four planes credit for sinking two destroyers.

But as for doing any damage to a cruiser or battleship, in my estimation you don't do any. The main thing is to draw fire so that your dive-bombers and torpedo planes can get in. When the torpedo planes were coming in on this battleship, the battleship blazed away with big guns trying to cause geysers so that the torpedo planes would fly into them. They did that all day but they didn't get a single torpedo plane. I saw one of Capt Dooley's hits – he got one right amidships. I was just a few feet off from the ship when it hit. Then I saw 1,000-lb bombs hit the battleship, and they still kept shooting their big guns – we never would shut up those big guns. Torpedoes and 1,000lb bombs would hit the vessel, but still the big guns kept going.

Q – Did you see her sink?
A – No, sir. That's the thing we all missed out on. We got the old thing dead in the water at about 4 o'clock in the afternoon – you could see that it had a slight list. It was then about two miles off Savo Island. A nice big cloud came up, what you'd call a thunderhead, up to about 24,000ft and tight down to the water. The Japs were right under that thing. They were in that place with five destroyers, a light cruiser and that battleship. We couldn't get in to get at them. I tried to go under the thing because I knew that they would be taking personnel off the battleship, and I thought that was really a chance to score. We'd go in there a few feet and we couldn't tell the water from the rain. It was solid. We just turned around and came back out again.

That night, they evidently left a skeleton crew aboard and towed the battleship around Savo Island so that it could take a few shots at Henderson Field as a farewell. There was one salvo of big stuff came in that night – that was all. Some think it turned over and sank after that one. Whether they planted dynamite in it or not, I don't know, but the next morning there was a big explosion. We never sighted the battleship again.

Q – I don't suppose you ever identified it – what class?
A. – It was of the *Kongo* class.

Q – Do you feel that fighter strafing is worthwhile in making the torpedo and bombing attacks more effective?
A – There's a lot of pro and con on that because sometimes it will cost you about 50 percent of your fighters. You really lose the fighters on that deal. When you do get out alive after a strafing attack on warships you just aren't good, you're lucky.

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Q – It does silence the AA?
A – Yes, it does on destroyers and transports, but on cruisers and battleships the AA keeps pegging away. The only thing that I silenced on the battleship was pompom guns. There was still plenty of AA around – I got one hit right under my wing. I had an idea of turning one way but just happened to turn the other way. It hit where I would have been.

Spread Between Guns

Q – How important do you think it is to keep your guns from being too widely separated?
A – I noticed on the F4U that the guns are really close together. I was wondering if they weren't so close together that they'd overheat?

Q – I didn't mean close to each other – but you've got one group of guns on one wing and one on the other wing – whether that's 15ft or 10ft, does it make very much difference?
A – No, sir. I wouldn't say that it did. In the Grumman, whenever we've caught troops we've been able to wipe out the whole outfit. One day, my wingman and I caught some troops on the road as we came out of a dive. They just stood still until we went by, and I called to him and said, "I'm going to do a quick wingover here and start shooting – you just get right under my wing and shoot where I am." We cut loose, and when we came back they were all knocked off. Our guns were set for 250 and 350 yards.

Q – How about combat against other aircraft? Does the spread between the two-gun placement make very much difference there?
A – No, sir. In combat, against the other planes, I've always used my outboard four guns and left off my inboard guns to save them in case I ran short on ammunition. On one occasion I made a mistake and instead of turning on my outboard four guns, I turned off my outboard four and turned on my inboard. When I started shooting, it sounded like a sewing machine – but I happened to be right on him and got him with the two. I'd like six guns on the plane and save two in case something goes wrong with the others, or if you run out of ammunition.

Q – Did you have any trouble with the reflector gunsight in night strafing?
A – Never did any night strafing or nightfighting.

Ammunition Combination

Q – In shooting at aircraft, what was the ammunition combination?
A – One-one-one. When we were in there the first time, we had one-one-one. When I came back, all the pilots said it won't be so easy shooting down Zeroes now because they've got armor plating in them and they have self-sealing tanks. They told us that they weren't blowing up like they used to. So we took a short check on the ammunition. The ordnance chief or someone had decided that maybe they should get rid of some AP ammunition they had over there. About 50 percent of it had been loaded, with five APs, an incendiary and a couple of tracers. As a result they weren't blowing the planes up so readily. We got that changed right then and now and started out the same way again, blowing them up.

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Q – Do you think the AP was necessary? We had an idea that tracer and incendiary were enough.
A – Well, the AP comes in handy with head-on passes at Zeroes. In fact, about 25 percent of the Zeroes shot down are direct head-on passes, just staying right in until the last second, hoping you get him or hoping he pulls up. That's where your AP comes in handy because you just keep drilling him right head on with the AP. He usually goes down or up.

Q – Did you see any skip-bombing?
A – No, Sir.

Q – What do you think of the idea of it for fighters?
A – I don't know enough about it to make any comments.

Gunnery

Q – What do you think of the use of tracer? Did you use your tracer for sighting?
A – Yes, sir. To start out I used the gunsight. After I got started, however, I just dropped my seat clear down so that I wouldn't have my neck stuck out and just barely looked over the edge. Then I used my tracer altogether, but I had previously used the gunsight enough to know right where to shoot. As for deflection shots, I'd always lead enough so that I'd never under-lead. I'd always over-lead. When you over-lead, you just ease forward on your stick and you can always see as far as the axis where he's going to go. You shoot in front of him and just ease forward on your stick. He flies right into it – you see your tracer work right on him. And on the tailend shot just give a burst of tracer. If it's over or under, you just go up or down. I never wanted to sit up high enough to look at the gunsight. I just stayed down. To start with, I flew around looking in the gunsight. It works fine, as far as the gunsight goes, but after a while you don't need it. In fact, I don't believe any of the boys that had been in combat a lot were using it – they all slid away down in the seat.

Q – Depended entirely on tracer?
A – Yes, sir.

Q – How close do you have to come to do effective damage?
A – When we started out, all our shooting was out of range. We would begin on the enemy a quarter-of-a-mile away, and by the time we actually got into range we'd used up our ammunition. Then we started getting in there from 300 yards to 50ft off, and really started hitting them. Then we moved it down so that we'd shoot right at 100 yards – then you can't miss. If you're off to one side or the other, just kick it on. If you shoot too far off, you scare 'em! If you keep your tracers out of there, the Jap pilot shoots. I've seen him shoot half-a-mile off – they just keep shooting until they go on range, and they're still shooting when they pass you. They really get rid of the ammunition!

I talked to the boys when a new outfit would come in. When you talk to a man before he goes out the first time it doesn't do any good, but after he's been out the first time or the first two times, then you can talk to him. He knows what you're talking about. I'd just tell them, "Get in there, really get them in your sights, and really shoot close." I told one

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group that, and every flight scored on the trip. They'd all had a couple of combats before, and they were shooting away out of range – 500 or 600 yards.

Q – Have you flown the F4Us?
A – Yes, I have. One hour-and-a-half hop in it. There were no other planes in the sky, so there was nothing to compare it to. But I liked the way it climbed and handled.

Q – How bad is the visibility?
A – I kept the seat clear up and my head up in that little knot on the top. I think that it would probably be all right – unless it was on a Zero, a full deflection shot going full speed.

Floatplanes

Q – What do you think about floatplane fighters?
A – Well, sir, those floatplane fighters that they have don't last anytime at all, I mean, they're sure death. Anytime we ever tangled with floatplane fighters, none got away. If you got floatplane fighters and mentioned it to somebody, he'd just laugh.

Q – There's been a lot of talk about floatplanes.
A – Shooting floatplanes is just like shooting down clay pigeons. They buzz around – they'll turn on a dime. I saw five P-39s chasing one one day. They had just started to shoot when he decided that was enough of that, so he turned around and came head-on back out. The P-39s scattered and went in all directions. Then they made another run, and when he'd see them all bearing down on him and starting to shoot, he'd made a quick turn and jumped right back through them, nearly causing them to have a collision with each other. They were all so crazy to get him that they chased him for 15 minutes before they finally got him.

Another morning my flight ran into two of them, and all seven of the boys turned off after the one. I had the other one to myself. I didn't want to fool around with him, so I gave him a burst and he started smoking. I thought I had him. I then raced over to get this other one that they were chasing. I started over and looked back. The one that I thought I'd got was taking off again up the channel. I went back.

Q – What good are they to the Japs, or how do they use them?
A – They use them at low altitudes, and they use them to jump SBDs. They come in handy as search planes. At first they had no bases on Guadalcanal, Munda and Kolambangara – their closest land base was Kahili. They moved these seaplanes into Rekata Bay, and from Rekata Bay they could sneak out and catch SBDs that were flying the different searches. They can handle an SBD. They can maneuver but they just haven't got the speed – I've seen them do slow rolls and all that stuff with their floatplane fighters.

Strafing

Q – In strafing a destroyer, what is the maximum distance for attack?
A – In strafing a destroyer, I would start shooting at 3,000ft. Some of them start shooting at 5,000ft, but in my opinion that's just wasting time and ammunition. I go right down

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and pull up below 1,000ft. After I pass the destroyer, I am right on the water. In strafing a troop transport, I'd drop over the bow or the stern, so that when I went out I was right on the water. I just cleared the ship, went over it, and then really snaked along. We shot all the way in, down to 500ft – by that time you're really going at a high speed – we were always upward of 300mph when we came by. On the way out none of us were hit – it was when you were coming down that you were in a bad spot. You have to look out for crossfire. The ship that you're strafing isn't the dangerous one – there's one on each side, and they start playing a crossfire into you, and they pretty well put it on you.

When six, seven or eight destroyers and cruisers were escorting transports and cargo ships, we'd come in and attack the corner warships so that we'd draw fire from these ships and give the dive-bombers a chance to go in and drop on the cargo and transport ships. They used to shoot at the fighters in preference to the dive-bombers. Whether they couldn't tell a dive-bomber from a fighter, I don't know. The Grumman looked so chubby that they right away thought it was a dive-bomber with a big bomb on it!

Q – Can you hit anything with a TBF in a 45-degree dive using bombs?
A – They put these bomb racks on and I know they got one hit. That kind of attack was comparatively new when I left there, so I have really no word on that.

Q – How did you coordinate strafing with dive-bombing?
A – The fighter flight commander would use his own judgment. The dive-bombers never told us. As soon as I'd see them getting ready, I knew just about what to do, so then I carried out my attack. It worked well.

Oxygen and Radio

Q – Have you any comment on oxygen, communications, radio equipment?
A – In regard to oxygen, when new pilots went in, there'd be a couple who would fail to have their masks on tight, or would get excited and get the mask off their face and pass out. Every time that some new pilots came in we'd always lose a couple of men. A lot of the time we'd have gasoline left after returning. If the Japs kept orbiting out there we wouldn't have enough oxygen to stay – we'd have to go on back down and hope that someone else got up there in time for the attack. They used to pull that old stuff all the time. They'd start an attack in and then turn out and go back out and orbit a while and then start in again for the attack, and then change their mind again. They knew that we were using gasoline and oxygen.

Q – Were you using the white mask or the newer one?
A – They were about 50-50 when I first arrived. Later, all the white ones were gone, and we were using the latest one, the big one. Some don't like the large mask. They like the little white one. As far as that's concerned, either one was all right. We just left the mask in the plane. We flew a different plane every hop so you never had the same type mask twice in a row.

We had a lot of trouble with the radio. They'd go out. They'd get them back in commission, but they'd go right out all the time. And then when we'd get 35 or 40 miles

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away, we were unable to receive Guadalcanal. We could talk to each other, and maybe the base could hear us, but we couldn't talk back and forth to the base. That's a handicap. The radio as I use it in combat is very important, because I direct the whole flight with it. We talk back and forth, though we don't put on a lot of unnecessary stuff over the air. If you see a Zero banging up and down and if one chap gets another one in his sight, you just yell over at him that there is a Zero on his tail to give him a chance so he doesn't make any fancy pull-ups. We saved a lot of necks by the radio. I've talked to the Army pilots the same way when I had P-38s or P-39s in combat with me. We'd direct the attack and tell them not to attack or to move around to the other side.

Q – Did you use the throat microphone?
A – Altogether.

Q – You didn't have microphones in those new masks you got out there?
A – Yes, sir, in some of them they did. As it happened, I had the throat mikes all the time.

Q – Do the Japs use radio much in their tactics?
A – One time they happened to be on our frequency, and we couldn't use our radios at all. Whether they were just being funny, I don't know, and I don't know what they were saying. It was just some mad mass of Japanese over the radio. They blocked us, and we couldn't say a word. We got off that frequency in a hurry. That's the only time I ever heard the Japs on the air.

Jap Tactics

They have a rather unusual way in their attacks. The leader always shies around. His wing mate flies back far enough so you can hit him off without the leader's ever knowing it. They fly more or less in a column – the wingman is supposed to stay with that leader. How he does it, I don't know. When you stay 200 or 300 yards behind your leader and try to follow him, you've really got something on your hands. The wingman has a tough time of it. I talked to some of the Japanese through an interpreter, some of the Japanese pilots, and they'd always shake their heads about following their leader, and talk about their heads going around and around. I see their point.

US Tactics

In our attacks, we'd move in close. Eight planes right close together. If we broke up it would be first one four-plane section and then the other four-plane section, then into two planes. In the end it's just a big dogfight. My wingman would stay right on me until there'd be a plane in front of me that I was chasing. Then a plane would be coming from one side or the other, and that was a farewell for my wingman. He just made a quick swing out, and he'd always get a head-on shot, probably not such a good shot, but he'd put out a shot and make a quick turn. I'd turn around the other way and hope that we'd come back together – if we didn't see each other, we joined up on the first Grumman we saw. And always branch out from that again.

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I had my boys fly up more or less on line when they were going into an attack – they flew pretty well up. If the attack moved in from the tail end, I'd just call to him [the last man in the formation] and he would lead the attack in – he'd be first man in, and I'd be last. Instead of all having to slide over, I'd just call him, and he could take over. We had very good luck that way. We were never surprised. He flew back about 30 degrees I'd say, or as much as 45 degrees, but never any of this column stuff. I always want to know where all my wingmen are.

Q – Are the Jap pilots who have been taken prisoner high-grade people?
A – The Zero pilot seems to be the better of the two, bomber and combat (fighter) pilots. They were very young, lads of 19-21, with very good builds. As for intelligence, they were pretty "thick." I don't mean to say they wouldn't answer my questions, because they would really answer questions. They would tell you about their fighter cover and about their tactics – things that we had been able to figure out already from the attacks. They gave us very accurate information in regard to six planes down and six up, and 12 planes in a flight. The Japs are pretty well broken up when they're taken prisoner. One told me the only reason he ever joined up in the Air Corps (sic) was so he could fly. Now he couldn't fly anymore – by that he meant that he'd never be able to fly for Japan again, and we won't take him on. He was out of luck. He was a 21-year-old chap who had gone to the University of Tokyo.

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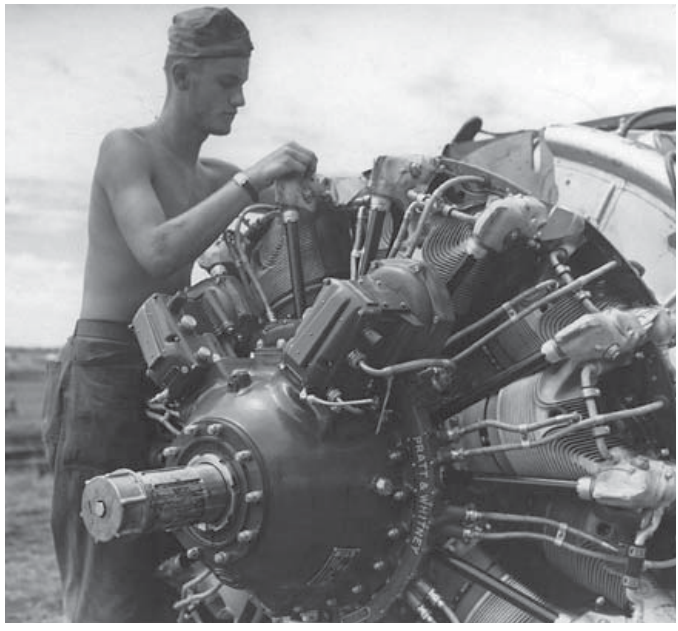

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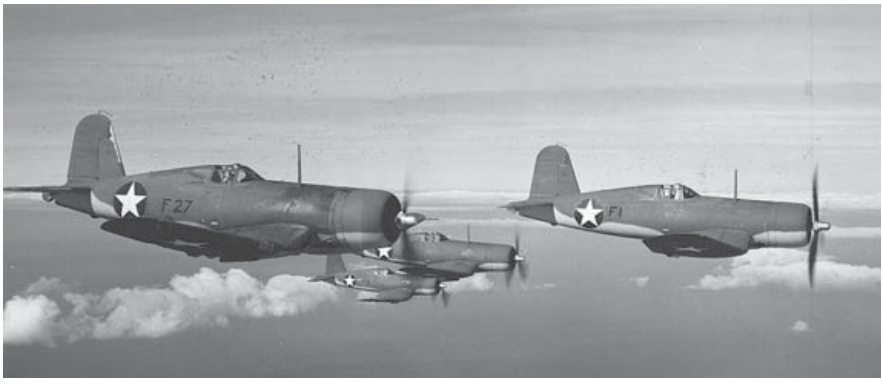

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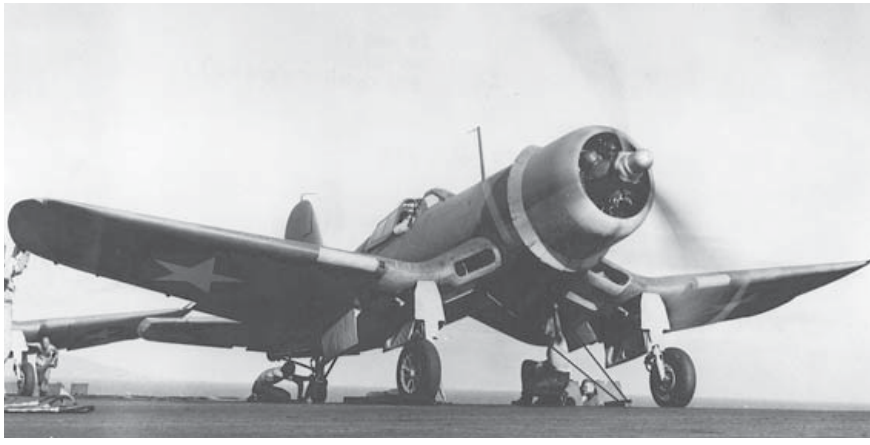

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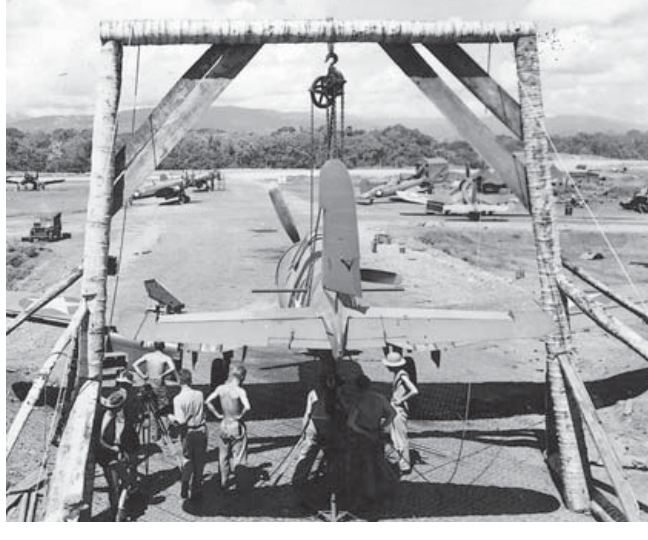

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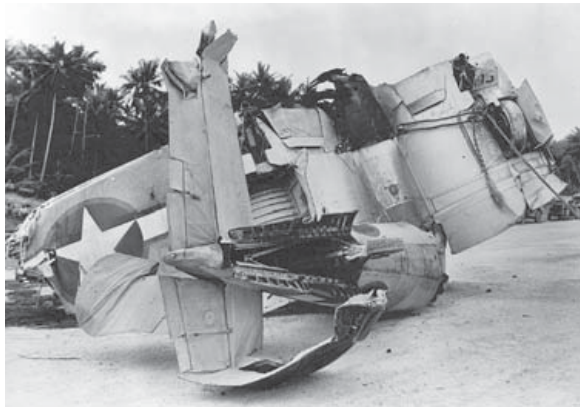

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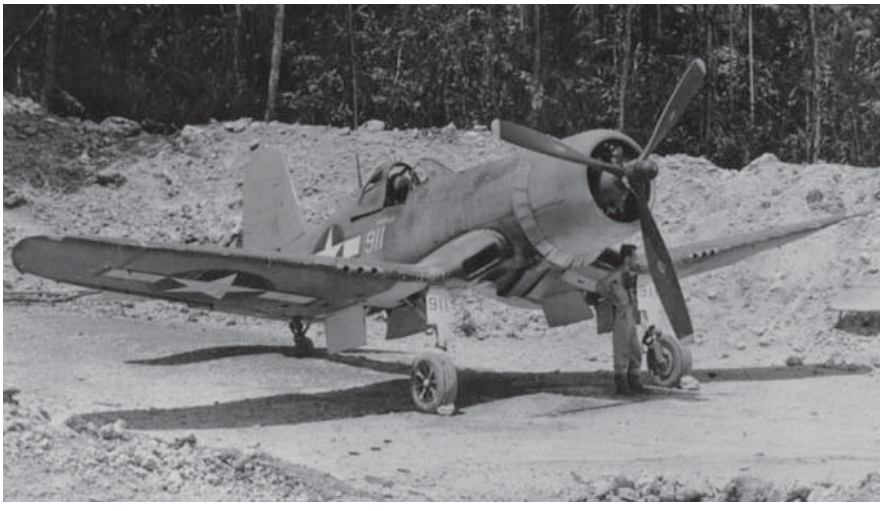

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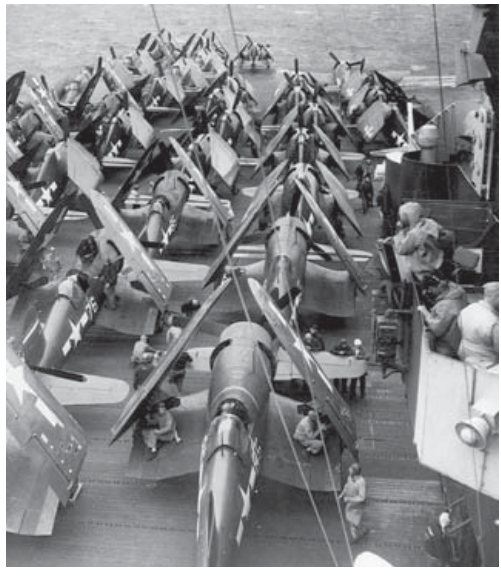

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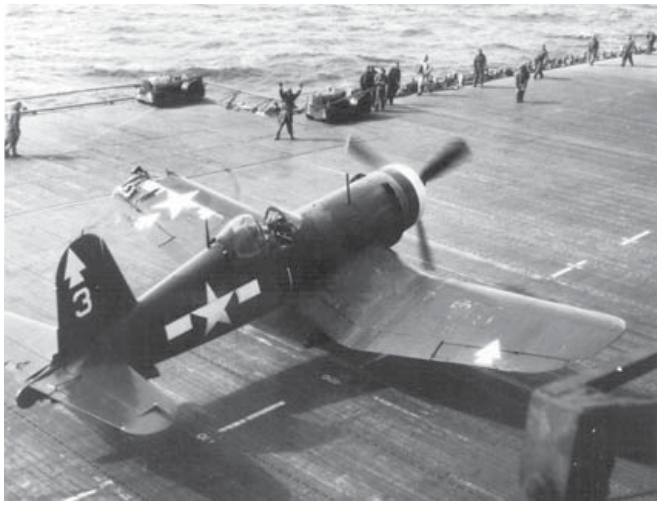

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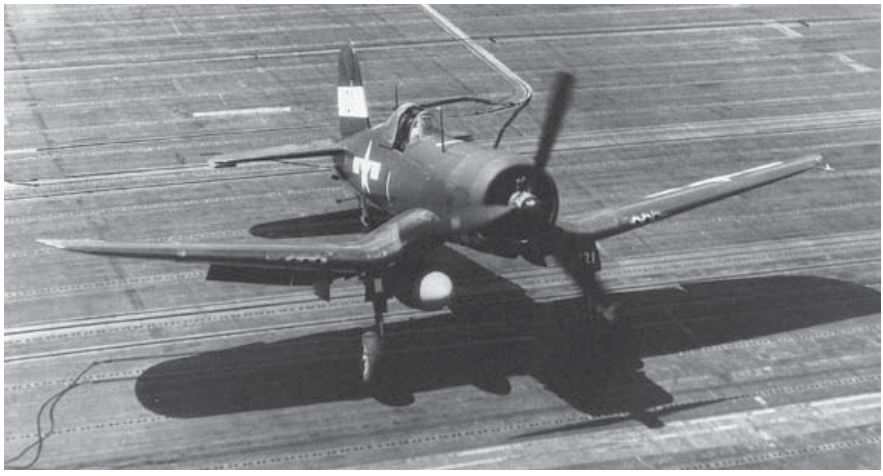

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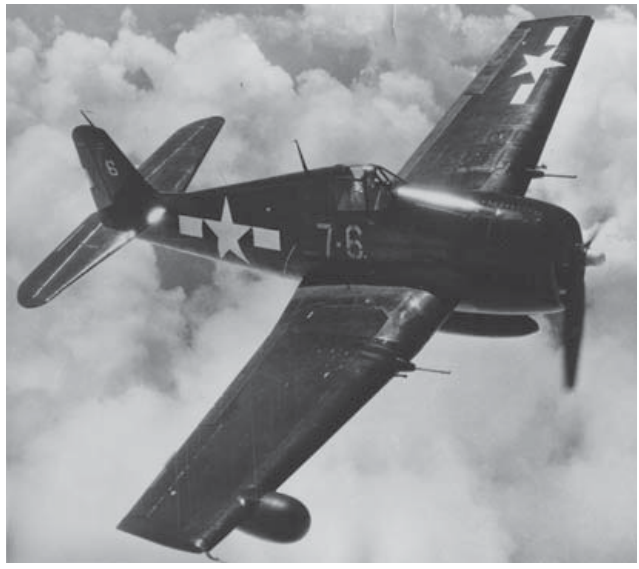

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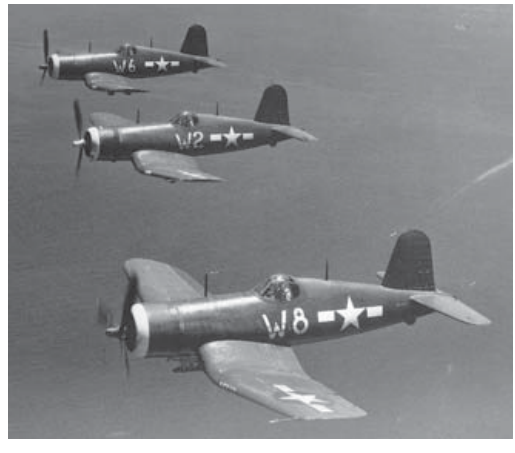

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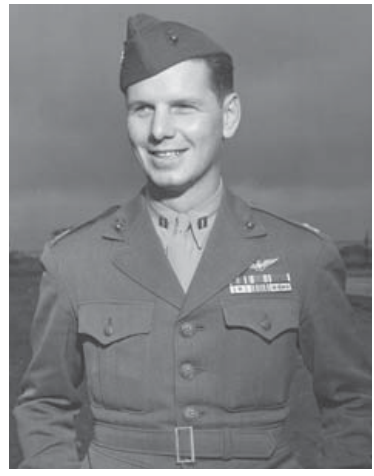

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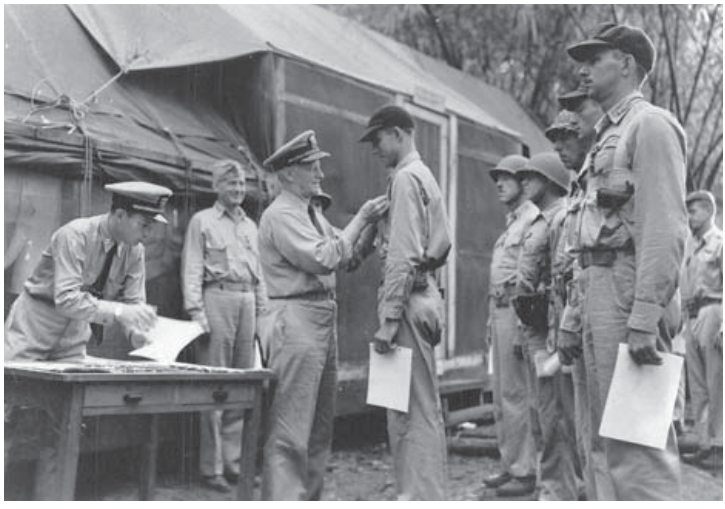

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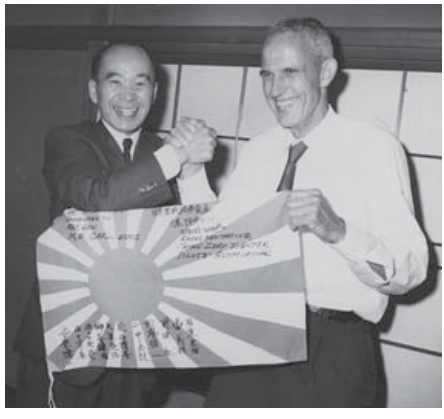

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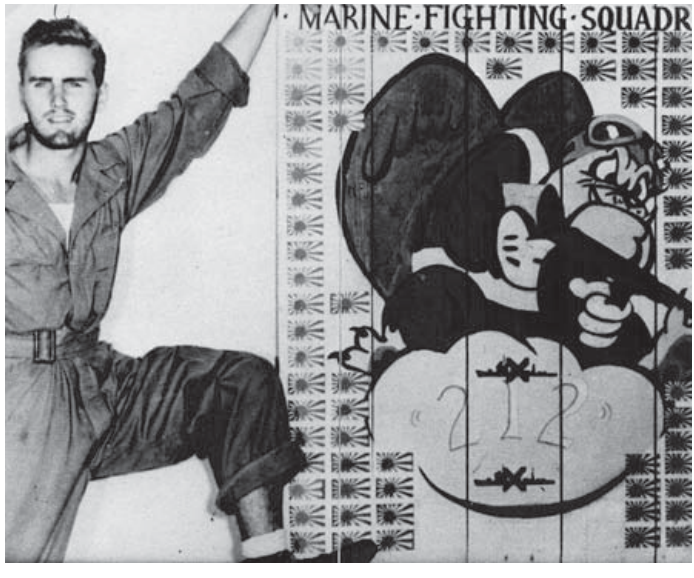

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1: A VMF-121 F4F-3 in pre-war colors of overall light gray with white identification numerals on the fuselage. (*Tailhook Association*)

2: Increasing numbers of Marines passed through San Diego's Aircraft Carrier Training Group in 1941, flying aircraft such as this F2A-2 Buffalo. (*Tailhook Association*)

3: A 2nd MAW F2A-2 Buffalo undergoing engine maintenance at MCAS Ewa, Hawaii, in April 1942. (*Tailhook Association*)

4: One of VMF-221's F4F-3s that limped back to Midway after the morning interception of Japanese carrier aircraft on June 4, 1942. Six Wildcats from the unit intercepted the large IJN air strike, with this machine (BuNo 4006) being flown by Capt John F. Carey. He succeeded in downing a dive-bomber before being wounded and returning to Midway. (*Tailhook Association*)

5: US Marine Corps squadrons had mixed fortunes with the F2A-2 Buffalo, as seen with this VMF-211 aircraft after landing aboard USS *Long Island* (CVE-1) in July 1942. (*Author's collection*)

6: An F4F-4 of VMF-121 during workups at Camp Kearney, north of San Diego, in the summer of 1942. (*Author's collection*)

7: The essential yet unheralded aspect of aviation is maintenance. This Marine is working on an F4F-4 engine at Guadalcanal in 1942. (*Tailhook Association*)

8: Early Guadalcanal operations were "expeditionary" in Marine terminology. This Wildcat scrambles from Henderson Field's dirt runway before pierced steel planking became available. (*Eric Hammel*)

9: A VMO-251 photo-reconnaissance F4F-7 taxies out at the start of a mission from Turtle Bay, Espiritu Santo, in November 1942. (*Eric Hammel*)

10: The Corsair hatchery – Vought's F4U assembly line at Stratford, Connecticut, on December 23, 1942. (*Author's collection*)

11: Maintenance facilities at "Cactus" were necessarily primitive, as demonstrated in this February 1943 photograph of a muddy dispersal area where F4Fs apparently had engines changed, as propellers are missing from some aircraft. (*Eric Hammel*)

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12: "Fighter Two" airstrip in January 1943, near the end of the Guadalcanal campaign. (*Eric Hammel*)

13: Pierced steel planking had been laid over the muddy dirt at Guadalcanal by the time this photograph was taken in February 1943. (*Eric Hammel*)

14: Even after the Japanese evacuated Guadalcanal air attacks continued. This Marine peers from a reinforced foxhole in the coconut plantation tent area in March 1943. (*Eric Hammel*)

15: Designated an observation squadron, VMO-251 flew numerous fighter missions in the Solomons during 1942-43. This F4F-3 receives attention in its improvised hangar at Espiritu Santo, New Caledonia, in March 1943. (*Tailhook Association*)

16: Parked beneath palm trees, four F4F-3s of VMO-251 await fueling and servicing at Espiritu Santo in March 1943. (*Tailhook Association*)

17: An F4F-4 of VMF-122 during workups at Camp Kearney, north of San Diego, in early 1943. The unit had been established there on March 1, 1942. (*Author's collection*)

18: A division of "birdcage" F4U-1s in training in early 1943. (*Author's collection*)

19: Although the US Marine Corps only began routine carrier operations at the end of 1944, frequently fighter squadrons launched from flightdecks to reach forward bases. For example, 39 F4U-1s (including this aircraft) assigned to VMF-213 were catapulted from USS *Copahee* (CVE-12) as the vessel sailed off New Caledonia on March 29, 1943. (*Author's collection*)

20: Led by *BUBBLES*, four "Hell Hawks" F4U-1s of VMF-213 patrol the Solomons during the summer of 1943. (*Tailhook Association*)

21: By June 1943 Corsairs had largely replaced Wildcats in Guadalcanal fighter squadrons. These F4Us are undergoing maintenance, with the nearest being hoisted into level flight attitude for boresighting the guns. (*Eric Hammel*)

22: Mechanics work on a Corsair's engine and oil cooler on Guadalcanal, 1943. Note the walkway affixed to the cowling and oil cooler inlet to permit direct access to the engine. (*Eric Hammel*)

23: By June 1943 Guadalcanal was a much different place than nine months before. Pierced steel planking and even a flightline flagpole afford a more civilized environment as mechanics prepare a Corsair for flight. Note tape over the gun ports to keep barrels clean. (*Eric Hammel*)

24: A VMF-112 "Wolfpack" pilot surveys 20mm cannon shell damage to his Corsair at Guadalcanal in the summer of 1943. (*Tailhook Association*)

25: The skipper of VMF-213 was Maj Gregory Weissenberger, who is seen here climbing aboard a "Hell Hawks" "birdcage" Corsair at Guadalcanal's "Fighter Two" airstrip in late July 1943. By then he had already claimed five Zero-sens destroyed, three on June 30 alone. (*Tailhook Association*)

26: Skipper Bob Owens appears bemused upon deplaning at VMF-215's sparse facilities at the newly-won Munda base in August 1943. (*Author's collection*)

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27: *Spirit of '76* was a patriotic adaptation of the aircraft number assigned to this "Fighting Corsairs" F4U-1 at Munda in August 1943. Note that the aircraft parked behind "76" retains the previous national insignia without bars. (*Author's collection*)

28: A pilot surveys the damage to his aircraft with other VMF-216 personnel on Bougainville in late 1943. The holes in the fighter's fuselage and tail indicate that the Zero-sen pilot was dead astern of the Corsair when he opened fire. (*Beuhler Library, National Museum of Naval Aviation*)

29: The VMF-214 "Black Sheep" area at Vella Lavella on November 1, 1943. Compare the tents and attire with the "Vella Lacava" locale in the egregious 1970s television series "Baa Baa Black Sheep". (*Eric Hammel*)

30: A briefing for VMF-123 pilots at Vella Lavella on October 31, 1943. The CO was Maj Richard Baker, who took the squadron home the following month. (*Eric Hammel*)

31: The Munda flightline in November 1943 as Corsair pilots start the engines of their fighters. (*Eric Hammel*)

32: The Corsair was a demanding aircraft, as proven by this VMF-124 mishap while landing at a Solomons base in late 1943. (*Beuhler Library, National Museum of Naval Aviation*)

33: Maj Everett Vaughan, CO of VMF(N)-532, in his F4U-2, *Shirley June*, on Roi Island in the Marshalls in early 1944. (*Beuhler Library, National Museum of Naval Aviation*)

34: Bomb-laden Corsairs, possibly from VMF-224 at Roi, prepare to taxi out for a mission against bypassed Japanese islands in the Marshalls. (*Tailhook Association*)

35: The unheralded yet essential personnel in Marine aviation were the maintenance folks. Relying on the headlights from a Jeep for illumination, a mechanic pulls the propeller of his F4U-1 through numerous blades to distribute oil in the cylinders before starting its engine for a predawn takeoff from Torokina. (*Eric Hammel*)

36: Corsairs arrayed on Bougainville's Torokina fighter strip, probably in early 1944. Note the pierced steel planking alongside packed dirt. (*Eric Hammel*)

37: Three of Naval Aviation's workhorses at Green Island in February 1944 – an F6F-3 (probably from VF-34), an SBD-4 and an F4U-1A. (*Eric Hammel*)

38: Solomon Islands "ready rooms" often left much to be desired, as this flightline alert facility on Green Island in early March 1944 proves. (*Eric Hammel*)

39: Nine "Flying Deuces" pilots arrive at VMF-222's Emirau flightline in April 1944. (*Tailhook Association*)

40: Mechanics of VMF-222 tend to one of their Corsairs at Bougainville in 1944. (*Tailhook Association*)

41: The combination that made the Solomons air campaign a success – construction engineers and aviators. Note that the two pilots on the right have clipped noteboards to their legs. (*Eric Hammel*)

42: Green Island, north of Bougainville, became a hub of the Solomons air campaign, evident in this 1944 photograph with F4Us and R4Ds in a palm-lined parking area. (*Tailhook Association*)

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43: An iconic image of Marine aviation – an F4U-1A parked on Green Island in May 1944, complete with towering palms and a bored-out-of-his-mind Marine in the shadow of the airplane. (*Eric Hammel*)

44: Corsairs parked along Emirau's taxiway circa May 1944. The island in the Bismarcks had been taken without opposition two months earlier. (*Eric Hammel*)

45: Munda, 150 miles northwest of Guadalcanal, was much improved from the early days in August 1943. This 1944 photograph shows SBDs taking off from a wide, well packed runway with drainage off to the side. (*Eric Hammel*)

46: A division of F4Us over Bougainville's coast during the Rabaul campaign of early 1944. (*Tailhook Association*)

47: Three F4Us from VMF-123 share the rudimentary facilities on Green Island with an F6F-3, a wingless SBD and several Warhawks from the RNZAF during the spring of 1944. (*Eric Hammel*)

48: A VMF-422 pilot wrapped his F4U into a ball during a landing at O'Hare Field, Abemama, in the Gilbert Islands, in the spring of 1944. (*Beuhler Library, National Museum of Naval Aviation*)

49: Parked in its revetment, this VMF-212 Corsair awaits its next sortie from Vella Lavella in the summer of 1944. (*Tailhook Association*)

50: *Chloe* was one of the PV-1N Venturas flown by VMF(N)-531 in the Solomons during 1943-44. (*Tailhook Association*)

51: A mechanic pulls a PV-1N prop through several blades before starting. Note that *Eight Ball* bears an "In Memory" tribute on its nose to one of VMF(N)-531's lost aircrews – seven PV-1Ns were destroyed between February and April 1944 alone. (*Tailhook Association*)

52: Bomb-armed F4U-1s possibly from VMF-111 prepare to take off from their Marshall Islands base in 1944. (*Author's collection*)

53: Bomb-laden Corsairs of the 4th MAW (again, possibly from VMF-111) en route to a Marshalls target in 1944. (*Eric Hammel*)

54: Marine aviation seldom meant a bunk and hot chow. This was the 2nd MAW's camp on Peleliu in the fall of 1944. (*Eric Hammel*)

55: The R5C Commando parked behind the taxiing VMF-114 F4U-1 has apparently just arrived at Peleliu to offload fuel or ordnance. The Corsair is possibly carrying napalm in its drop tank. (*Tailhook Association*)

56: The white-nosed Corsairs of VMF-114 at Peleliu provided instant CAS to Marine riflemen, sometimes hitting targets that were so close to their airfield that there was no time to raise the landing gear after takeoff prior to dropping their ordnance. (*Author's collection*)

57: VMF(N)-541 "Bat Eyes" Hellcats arrayed on Peleliu in September 1944 – just days after the unit had flown in to the island from Emirau. (*Rowland P. Gill*)

58: VMF(N)-534 F6F-3N on the flightline at Orote Field, Guam, in August 1944. (*Author's collection*)

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59: One of the most-photographed Corsairs was VMF-111's "Old 122," seen here receiving its 100th mission emblem in the Marshalls during November 1944. Crew chiefs Walter Eason and G. H. Miller received commendations for their work on keeping this aircraft serviceable. (*Tailhook Association*)

60: An F4U-1 of VMF-321 probably on Guam in late 1944. The "Hell's Angels" had more colorful and more individual markings than most Marine squadrons, this well-worn aircraft featuring a unit emblem beneath the cockpit. (*Author's collection*)

61: A VMF-351 aviator engages the barrier during carrier qualifications aboard USS *Ranger* (CV-4) in December 1944. (*Beuhler Library, National Museum of Naval Aviation*)

62: The first US Marine Corps Corsair squadrons embarked in a fast carrier were VMF-124 and VMF-213, which operated from USS *Essex* (CV-9) between December 1944 and March 1945. (*Beuhler Library, National Museum of Naval Aviation*)

63: The *Essex* flight deck officer gives the "go" signal to a US Marine Corps Corsair on January 25, 1945, the aircraft participating in strikes against Formosa. (*Eric Hammel*)

64: From late 1944 US Marine Corps F4Us went to sea to provide increased task force defense. VMF-124 and VMF-213 pilots recover aboard *Essex* on January 25, 1945. (*Eric Hammel*)

65: A division of VMF-122 "Candystripers" F4U-1 Corsairs on patrol from Peleliu in early 1945. (*Author's collection*)

66: Cannon-armed F4U-1Cs of VMF-311 get their fuel tanks topped off before departing Iwo Jima for Okinawa on April 18, 1945. (*Tailhook Association*)

67: A division of VMF-323 "Death Rattlers" FG-1Ds flies overlapping wingtip formation on a TBM-3 Avenger over Okinawa in the spring of 1945. (*Tailhook Association*)

68: Ordnancemen inspect .50in. ammunition before loading the guns of MAG-12 Corsairs on Leyte in early 1945. (*Eric Hammel*)

69: Corsairs on an Iwo Jima flightline being refueled after their arrival from the Marshall Islands. (*Eric Hammel*)

70: Among the seagoing US Marine Corps fighter squadrons was VMF-112 aboard USS *Bennington* (CV-20). This F4U-1D sustained battle damage in an early 1945 mission. (*Tailhook Association*)

71: Small Jeeps perform as mechanical "mules" in moving aircraft on the flightdeck of USS *Bunker Hill* (CV-17) in March 1945. VMF-221 and VMF-451 augmented CAG-84 from February through May 1945. (*Beuhler Library, National Museum of Naval Aviation*)

72: VMF-216 and VMF-217 flew from *Wasp* in February-March 1945 WestPac operations. (*Author's collection*)

73: VMF-511 deployed eight F4U-1D Corsairs and eight F6F-5N Hellcats as part of MCVG-1 embarked in USS *Block Island* (CVE-106) between March and September 1945. (*Author's collection*)

74: *"Butch"* was a VMF-511 Hellcat that snagged *Block Island's* barrier in a marginal landing on May 19, 1945. (*Eric Hammel*)

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75: A damaged F6F-5N of VMF-511 is jettisoned from *Block Island* during Okinawa operations in May 1945. (*Eric Hammel*)

76: An immaculate "Fox Nan 29" of VMF-511 is ready to launch from *Block Island* in early 1945. (*Author's collection*)

77: Pilots and staff consult on the Ulithi flightline in April 1945. MAG-45 was the resident Marine Air Group from October 1944 to VJ Day. Despite the *SQ. 121* titling on the Jeep, VMF-121 was in fact in the Palaus, not on Ulithi. (*Eric Hammel*)

78: The most-produced and most successful American nightfighter of World War II was the F6F-5N Hellcat. (*Author's collection*)

79: Photo Hellcats are seen over the Pacific flying wing on a navigation aircraft en route to Saipan from Engebi in May 1945. (*Eric Hammel*)

80: Business as usual on Peleliu in the spring of 1945. Corsairs of VMF-122 start engines with "fire guards" nearby with extinguishers. Note the sign "IFF ON?" reminding pilots to activate their transponders to signify that they were a friendly aircraft. (*Eric Hammel*)

81: This VMF-512 Corsair came to grief attempting to land aboard USS *Gilbert Islands* (CVE-107) in the early spring of 1945. (*Author's collection*)

82: Despite being one of the US Marine Corps' top-ranking squadrons, VMF-215 was disestablished in November 1944. In early 1945 it was reconstituted as an operational training unit at Ewa, Hawaii. These 'W' prefixed machines assigned to the "Fighting Corsairs" were photographed on a training flight in mid 1945. (*Author's collection*)

83: VMF-312 ordnancemen wheel a 500-lb bomb toward a "Checkerboards" F4U-1A on Okinawa in April 1945. (*Author's collection*)

84: A rara avis for US Marine Corps squadrons, this F6F-5P was flown by photo-reconnaissance squadron VMD-354 from Guam in 1945. (*Tailhook Association*)

85: These F4U-1Ds of VMF-224 were photographed on a busy Iwo Jima flightline in April 1945 when the unit was en route to Okinawa from Roi, in the Marshalls. The PB4Y-2 Privateer parked behind the Corsairs was almost certainly acting as the navigation aircraft for the unit. (*Author's collection*)

86: Eight F6F-5N Hellcats of VMF(N)-543 "Night Hawks" in echelon fly past Mount Fuji shortly after VJ Day. (*Beuhler Library, National Museum of Naval Aviation*)

87: Trail's end. The "Whispering Aces" of VMF-113 were among the early occupation forces, operating from Omura in late 1945. (*Author's collection*)

88: On September 7, 1945, F4U-1D-equipped VMF-441 flew into the large Japanese base at Yokosuka, thus making it one of the first US Marine Corps squadrons to operate in Japan proper. Like most aviation units assigned to the occupation, the "Black Jacks" conducted a photo sortie over Mount Fuji – this shot was taken in January 1946. (*Tailhook Association*)

89: The ultimate US naval fighter of World War II, Grumman's F7F-3 Tigercat was most widely employed as a nightfighter post-war and in Korea. (*Beuhler Library, National Museum of Naval Aviation*)

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90: Capt Donald N. Aldrich was credited with 20 victories while flying with VMF-215 in 1943-44. (*Official Marine Corps Photo*)

91: 1Lt John Andre poses in his F4U-5N in Korea shortly after downing a Yak-9 on June 7, 1952. The victory made him the last piston-engined ace in US Marine Corps history, as he had claimed four victories with VMF(N)-541 in December 1944. (*Author's collection*)

92: Capt Bob Baird (seen here as a colonel just prior to his retirement in July 1971) was the US Marine Corps' only nightfighter ace. (*Official Marine Corps Photo*)

93: Capt Harold W. Bauer was widely regarded as perhaps the US Marine Corps' finest aviator pre-war. He had claimed 11 victories and attained the rank of lieutenant colonel by the time he was posted Missing in Action on November 14, 1942. (*Official Marine Corps Photo*)

94: The only US Marine Corps two-war ace was Jack Bolt, who scored six victories with VMF-214 in 1943-44 and equaled that feat as an F-86 exchange pilot in 1953. (*Tailhook Association*)

95: Maj Greg Boyington relaxes with a cigarette between missions while serving as CO of VMF-112 between April and June 1943. (*Eric Hammel*)

96: This publicity shot from December 1943 shows Maj Greg Boyington "delivering" Japanese victory flags in exchange for St Louis Cardinals caps. The recipient is Lt Chris Magee, VMF-214's second ranking ace with nine victories. (*Eric Hammel*)

97: Now Lt Col Boyington was reunited with some of his VMF-214 pilots upon his return to the US in September 1945 following 19 months as a PoW. (*Author's collection*)

98: According to his contemporaries, Marion Carl was the only fighter pilot in the same league as Joe Bauer. Half a century later, the unassuming Carl was still regarded as one of the three finest all-round Naval Aviators of his generation. When this photograph was taken in late 1943, Maj Carl, CO of VMF-223, had just claimed the last of his 18.5 victories. (*Tailhook Association*)

99: Capt Marion Carl receives his second Navy Cross from Adm Chester Nimitz on September 30, 1942. He received his first following combat in defense of Midway on June 4, 1942. (*Tailhook Association*)

100: Marion Carl and the high-scoring IJN Zero-sen ace Saburo Sakai at a Tokyo meeting in 1971. They missed each other in the skies over Guadalcanal by just two weeks. (*Author's collection*)

101: 2Lt Dean Caswell was the top-scoring US Marine Corps carrier pilot of all time, claiming seven victories with VMF-221 while it was assigned to CAG-84 embarked in *Bunker Hill* during the 1944-45 kamikaze crisis. (*Official Marine Corps Photo*)

102: 1Lt Jack Conger poses with VMF-212's impressive scoreboard in late 1942. He claimed eight victories flying with the unit between October 18 and 30 that year, having scored his first two kills the previous month while on loan to VMF-223. (*Beuhler Library, National Museum of Naval Aviation*)

103: VMF-213's Capt Jim Cupp christened his F4U-1 *DAPHNE 'C'* for his wife. Credited with 12 victories, Cupp claimed 4.5 in a single encounter, over Vella Gulf, on September 18, 1943. (*Official Marine Corps Photo*)

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104: 1Lt Jeff DeBlanc attained ace status on January 31, 1943 when he downed five IJN and JAAF aircraft in a single mission over Vella Gulf. The first US Marine Corps pilot to achieve this feat, he was initially awarded the Navy Cross for his exploit. However, in December 1946 this was upgraded to the Medal of Honor. (*Author's collection*)

105: 1Lt Phil Delong enjoyed great success with VMF-212 in the Rabaul area in January-February 1944, claiming 11.166 kills. He added two more victories to his tally on April 21, 1951 when he downed a pair of North Korean Yak-9s while flying F4U-4s with VMF-312. (*Official Marine Corps Photo*)

106: A veteran of 215 combat missions, Archie Donahue claimed nine victories with VMF-112 in 1942-43 and five with VMF-451 in 1945 – the latter were all scored during a prolonged engagement south of Okinawa on April 12. (*Official Marine Corps Photo*)

107: Although VMF-323's Maj Jefferson Dorroh only engaged enemy aircraft once, the former flight instructor made the most of it by downing six "Vals" and claiming two more as probables north of Aguni Shima during the evening of April 22, 1945.

108: 2Lt Charles W. Drake was one of the 12 pilots from VMF-323 "Death Rattlers" who made ace during the Okinawa campaign of 1945. He scored five confirmed victories with the unit, including four "Zekes" destroyed and a fifth one as a probable on June 3, 1945. Drake was awarded a Navy Cross following this mission. (*Tailhook Association*)

109: Capt Henry Elrod of VMF-211 became the first Marine aviator to be awarded the Medal of Honor, albeit posthumously, in World War II. Although he was not an ace (he was credited with one G3M bomber destroyed and a second as a probable – he also sank the IJN destroyer *Kisaragi*), Elrod's stellar example of leadership against the odds during the doomed defense of Wake Island is legendary in the US Marine Corps. (*Frank Olynyk*)

110: Loren "Doc" Everton claimed victories with three units. His first three successes came during a brief loan period with VMF-223 in August 1942, prior to his return to VMF-212. Everton was credited with a further seven victories with the latter unit in October, prior to his evacuation with wounds sometime after the 20th of that same month. He then helped form VMF-113, and scored his final two kills with the squadron in March 1944. (*Official Marine Corps Photo*)

111: Capt Joe Foss pensively stares off into the middle distance, his weary fatigues perhaps best illustrating the strain that he and every other Marine pilot who served in the defense of Guadalcanal had been subjected to from August 1942 through to early 1943. This photograph was just one of dozens taken by the US Marine Corps for publicity purposes in the weeks after Foss had equaled Eddie Rickenbacker's 26 credited victories in World War I. (*Author's collection*)

112: A lot of talent in one photograph. Joe Foss escorts Charles Lindbergh on Emirau in May 1944, with bareheaded Marion Carl just behind. Lindbergh flew combat missions in F4Us in the Solomons and Marshalls. (*Eric Hammel*)

113: Maj Joe Foss served as commanding officer of VMF-115 from its establishment in July 1943 through to September 1944. (*Eric Hammel*)

114: VMF-223's third-ranking ace after Maj John Smith and Capt Marion Carl, Capt Ken Frazier scored all but one of his 12.5 victories flying F4F-4s over Guadalcanal in August-

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September 1942. His final victory came in December 1943, again with VMF-223, at the controls of an F4U-1. (*Official Marine Corps Photo*)

115: Having formed VMF-224 at Ewa, Hawaii, in May 1942, Maj Bob Galer led the unit into combat at Guadalcanal just over three months later. By the time he was evacuated from the Solomons on October 29 he had downed 13 enemy aircraft, and claimed four more as probables. These successes earned him a Medal of Honor. (*Author's collection*)

116: 1Lt Sheldon O. Hall was a pre-war teacher who won his wings in 1942. Flying with VMF-213, he claimed six victories, all confirmed, between June 30 and July 18, 1943. Making ace on the latter date with two Zero-sens destroyed, Hall was shot down during this engagement. He bailed out badly wounded and was subsequently evacuated back to the US. (*Tailhook Association*)

117: 1Lt Bob Hanson was the leading Corsair ace, claiming two victories with VMF-214 and 23 with VMF-215 between August 4, 1943 and January 30, 1944. (*Author's collection*)

118: This official photograph, dated August 4, 1943, shows 2Lt Bob Hanson of VMF-214 posing next to his battle-damaged F4U-1. His fighter had been struck by 20mm cannon shells purportedly fired from a Zero-sen over Munda. Hanson promptly shot his opponent down, the future ace being credited with his first kill on this date. His victim was, however, a Ki-61 "Tony". (*Author's collection*)

119: Herb "Trigger" Long claimed victories with three different units in two types of fighters. His first three kills were achieved in F4U-4s of VMF-121 in January 1943, after which he returned to his pre-war unit VMF-122 following its transition to the F4U-1. Long claimed three victories with the squadron in July 1943. Promoted to major in January 1944, he joined VMF-451 later that same year and was credited with four kills in March-April 1945 while flying with the squadron from *Bunker Hill*. (*Official Marine Corps Photo*)

120: Maj Marion Magruder led "Black Mack's Killers" of VMF(N)-533 to the top of the US Marine Corps nightfighter community in terms of aerial victories. (*Mark Magruder*)

121: 1Lt Bob McClurg flew two combat tours with VMF-214 (he was occasionally "Pappy" Boyington's wingman) and one with VMF-211, and he claimed all seven of his aerial victories and two probables with the "Black Sheep" between September 16 and December 28, 1943. (*Tailhook Association*)

122: A seminal figure in US Marine Corps carrier operations, Lt Col Bill Millington took VMF-124 and VMF-213 to the fast carriers in December 1944. He subsequently became the first Marine to command a US Navy carrier air group when he briefly took charge of CAG-4 aboard USS *Essex* (CV-9) from January 15, 1945. (*Eric Hammel*)

123: 1Lt Paul A. Mullen flew with three squadrons, scoring 6.5 victories with VMF-122, VMF-112 and VMF-214. He died in a flying accident while serving with VMF-224 in Japan in February 1946. (*Tailhook Association*)

124: Seen here post-war as a full colonel, "Fritz" Payne was the first American fighter ace to celebrate his 100th birthday, in July 2011. At that time he was one of fewer than ten US Marine Corps aces still living. (*Official Marine Corps Photo*)

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125: Maj Bruce Porter, the 24-year-old CO of VMF(N)-542, in his Hellcat, *Black Death*. Porter became an ace at Okinawa with a double victory on the night of June 15, 1945. (*Author's collection*)

126: Capt Bruce Porter and Cpl Russell Isles were involved in filming the 1943 movie *Guadalcanal Diary*. (*Author's collection*)

127: A pre-war Naval Aviator, Maj Don Sapp completed three combat tours in the Solomons with VMF-222. He claimed ten victories, four probables and two damaged with the unit in 1943-44. Sapp subsequently led VMF-524 and VMF-122. (*Official Marine Corps Photo*)

128: 1Lt Harold E. "Murderous Manny" Segal claimed ten victories with VMF-221 during the course of two combat tours with the unit in 1943. His final two kills came in January 1944, by which time he was serving with VMF-211. (*Official Marine Corps Photo*)

129: Edward O. "Bud" Shaw joined VMF-213 in January 1943 and duly flew three combat tours with the "Hellhawks" at Guadalcanal between April and December of that same year. By the time he led the unit back to the US, Shaw had been credited with 14.5 victories and one probable. Subsequently posted to MCAS Mojave, he was killed while flying an F4U-1A in dive tests in July 1944. *(Official Marine Corps Photo*)

130: Medal of Honor recipient and 19-victory ace Maj John L. Smith was the subject of this Stateside publicity shot taken after his return from Guadalcanal in late October 1942. Leather helmets and immaculate intermediate jackets were never seen in the Solomons. (*Tailhook Association*)

131: Capt Bill Snider claimed all 11.5 of his victories with VMF-221 during four combat tours. His first three successes (on April 1, 1943) came while he was flying an F4F-4 over the Russell Islands. Snider claimed two more kills on October 17, 1943 to make ace, by which time the "Fighting Falcons" were flying F4U-1s. In December 1944 VMF-221 embarked in *Bunker Hill* as part of CAG-84, and Snider was credited with 6.5 victories flying from the carrier between February 16 and April 16, 1945. (*Official Marine Corps Photo*)

132: After April 7, 1943, the ambition of every hard-charging Marine aviation cadet was to "do a Jimmy Swett." Seven victories in a pilot's first combat was almost unheard of, even in the target-rich environment of World War II. Proving that it was no fluke, "Zeke" Swett went on to claim a further 8.5 kills, all with VMF-221. (*Eric Hammel*)

133: Capt Jim Swett (right) received the Medal of Honor from Maj Gen Ralph Mitchell, Commanding General of Marine Aviation in the South Pacific, on October 9, 1943, six months after then-1Lt Swett had downed seven "Val" dive-bombers in one mission. (*Eric Hammel*)

134: Wilbur J. "Gus" Thomas was the ranking ace of VMF-213, claiming 16.5 kills with the unit in the Solomons between June 30 and October 11, 1943. Still serving with the unit when it embarked in *Essex* with CAG-4 in December 1944, Thomas was credited with two more victories on February 16, 1945. (*Official Marine Corps Photo*)

135: Ken Walsh had over five years of operational flying before deploying to Guadalcanal with VMF-124 at the age of 26. He became the first Corsair ace, opening his score with three victories on April 1, 1943. (*Author's collection*)

136: A haul of three "Zekes" on May 11, 1943 gave 2Lt Ken Walsh the distinction of being

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the first Corsair ace. By war's end his score stood at 21 kills, two probables and one damaged, all bar one of his successes being claimed with VMF-124 in 1943. (*Author's collection*)

137: VMF-112 "Wolfpack" with squadron scoreboard showing 74 victories as of early June 1943. (*Author's collection*)

138: Maj Bob Fraser (sat in front at right) with members of VMF-112 in June 1943. Victory flags on discarded propeller blades were a Guadalcanal convention that summer. The cumulative total here is 71, dating the photo as circa June 5. The squadron emblem and dates on the cut-down drop tank have been erased by the censor. (*Eric Hammel*)

139: Pilots from VMF-121 pose for the camera atop one of their Wildcats at Henderson Field in late 1942. The pilot at the extreme left is 6.5-victory ace 2Lt Roger Haberman, and sitting fourth from left is Guadalcanal ace of aces, Capt Joe Foss. (*Author's collection*)

140: Joe Foss with members of his "flying circus" at Guadalcanal on January 4, 1943. They are, from left to right, Roger Haberman (6.5 kills), Cecil Doyle (5 kills), Foss (26 kills), Bill Marontate (12 kills) and Roy Ruddell (3 kills). Marontate was killed in action 11 days after this photograph was taken. (*Author's collection*)

141: Joe Foss reunited with veterans of VMF-121 in the US. All were entitled to wear combat and campaign ribbons, but none did so on this occasion. In the front row, from left to right, are Roger Haberman (6.5 kills) and Frank Presley (4.5 kills), while standing in the rear, again from left to right, are Oscar Bate (5 kills), Greg Loesch (8.5 kills), Foss (26 kills), Bill Freeman (6 kills) and "Boot" Furlow (3 kills). (*Eric Hammel*)

142: The first US Marine Corps F4U squadron, VMF-124 reached Guadalcanal on February 12, 1943. This photograph was taken several weeks later, and it features skipper Bill Gise (fourth from the right, front row), who was killed in action on May 13, 1943. (*via Ken Walsh*)

143: Flying leathernecks of VMF-124 and VMF-213 come together on the flightdeck of *Essex* for a group photograph on January 1, 1945. These two units were the first US Marine Corps fighter squadrons to deploy in a fast carrier. (*Eric Hammel*)

144: The COs and execs of the two CAG-4 US Marine Corps squadrons embarked in *Essex* pose with the senior Marine aviator aboard the ship, Lt Col Bill Millington. They are, from left to right, Majs James Johnson (VMF-124) and David Marshall (VMF-213), Lt Col Bill Millington (3 kills) and Majs Fay Domke (VMF-213) and William Crowe (VMF-124). Crowe had claimed seven kills with VMF-124 in 1943. (*Eric Hammel*)

145: Surrounded by senior pilots from VMF-124 and VMF-213, Lt Col Bill Millington (pointing at the map) conducts a briefing for the benefit of the photographer aboard *Essex* in January 1945. (*Eric Hammel*)

146: Maj Greg Boyington (center) listens to one of his pilots debrief a recent engagement with the enemy. This photograph was taken during Boyington's brief period in command of VMF-122, which came to an abrupt end on June 7, 1943 when he broke an ankle in a brawl (later Marine versions of the story said it was a football game). He had only joined the unit on April 20. (*Eric Hammel*)

147: Standing third from left, Maj Greg Weissenberger (5 kills), the CO of VMF-213, briefs two divisions for a mission from Guadalcanal in May-June 1943. (*Eric Hammel*)

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148: "Hellhawks" return to the roost as VMF-213 pilots stand down after a scramble from the Russells in June 1943. Amenities include the crude support for a water bag and the upright artillery shell casing serving as an alarm bell. (*Eric Hammel*)

149: One of VMF-214's best-known publicity photographs was this shot with pilots sporting baseball bats and St Louis Cardinals caps, which was taken in late December 1943. (*Eric Hammel*)

150: Fighter pilots from VMF-214 take notes during a briefing in January 1944 near the end of the unit's combat tour. The board on the tent wall contains survival equipment and instructions. (*Eric Hammel*)

151: VMF-215 boasted the first pilots to land at Munda, and some of them are seen here examining abandoned JAAF Ki-43 "Oscars" in August 1943. Standing, from left to right, are 1Lt R. K. Wolff (2 kills), Capt R. L. Braun (5 kills), Capt R. E. Johnson and 1Lt A. R. Conant (6 kills), and on the wing are Lt D. A. Eacher (no victories) and Maj R. G. Owens (7 kills). (*Eric Hammel*)

152: VMF-215's trio of leading aces – 1Lt Bob Hanson (25 kills) and Capts Hal Spears (15 kills) and Don Aldrich (20 kills) – were photographed together at Bougainville in January 1944. Hanson was killed in action the following month, Spears died in a flying accident in an SBD in December 1944 and Aldrich perished in a Corsair crash in May 1947. (*Eric Hammel*)

153: Officers of VMF-221 in the Russell Islands during the summer of 1943. The CO, Maj Munford Peyton (3 kills), sits front row center. Most squadrons settled for one mascot – the "Fighting Falcons" had two! (*Eric Hammel*)

154: Majs John L. Smith (VMF-223) and Bob Galer (VMF-224) with Capt Marion Carl (VMF-223) received Navy Crosses from Adm Chester Nimitz, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Ocean Areas, on September 30, 1942. (*Author's collection*)

155: Three pilots from VMF-321 pose with the "Hell's Angels'" scoreboard on Green Island in April 1944. They are, from left to right, 1Lt Robert See (5 kills) and Majs Edmund Overend (5 kills) and Thomas Coles (2 kills). Overend also claimed two victories with the AVG. (*Eric Hammel*)

156: VMF-323 "Death Rattlers'" deadly pilots after their record-setting mission of April 22, 1945, when they claimed 24.75 victories. In the front row, from left to right, are 1Lts C. S. Allen (1 kill), N. T. Theriault (2.25 kills) and E. L. Abner (2 kills), and standing are Majs G. C. Axtell (5 kills) and J. D. Dorroh (6 kills) and 1Lts J. J. O'Keefe (5 kills) and W. L. Hood (3.5 kills). (*Author's collection*)

157: Three F4F-3s of VMF-111 participate in the large-scale joint service maneuvers that were staged across the southern USA in 1941. The red crosses indicate that the Wildcats belonged to the "Red Force", opposing the friendly "Blue Force" whose aircraft were marked with white crosses. (*Tailhook Association*)

158: A much-used VMF-214 "Black Sheep" F4U-1A on Bougainville in late 1943. As usual, the last three digits of the aircraft's BuNo comprised the fuselage "buzz" number. (*Tailhook Association*)

159: A VMF-511 ordnanceman tends to the guns of an F4U-1D aboard the escort carrier *Block Island* in early 1945. (*Tailhook Association*)

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160: *Cape Gloucester* prepares to catapult two F4U-1Ds from VMF-351 off its flightdeck in 1945. (*Tailhook Association*)

Emblems

161: VMF-113 “Whistling Devils”
162: VMF-114 “Death Dealers”
163: VMF-115 “Joe’s Jokers”
164: VMF-123 “Eightballs”
165: VMF-124 “Death’s Head”/“Wild Aces”
166: VMF-211 “Wake Island Avengers”
167: VMF-212 “Hell Hounds”
168: VMF-213 “Hell Hawks”
169: VMF-214 “Swashbucklers”/“Black Sheep”
170: VMF-214 “Swashbucklers”/“Black Sheep”
171: VMF-215 “Fighting Corsairs”
172: VMF-217 “Max’s Wild Hares”
173: VMF-218 “Hellions”
174: VMF-221 “Fighting Falcons”
175: VMF-222 “Flying Deuces”
176: VMF-223 “Rainbow”/“Bulldogs”
177: VMF-224 “Fighting Wildcats”
178: VMF-311 “Hell’s Belles”
179: VMF-313 “Lily Packin’ Hellbirds”
180: VMF-314 “Bob’s Cats”
181: VMF-322 “Cannonballs”
182: VMF-324
183: VMF-422 “Flying Buccaneers”
184: VMF-451 “Blue Devils”
185: VMF-452 “Sky Raiders”
186: VMF-462
187: VMF-471
188: VMF-472
189: VMF-511
190: VMF-512
191: VMF-513
192: VMF-514
193: VMF-524
194: VMF(N)-532
195: VMF(N)-533 “Black Mac’s Killers”
196: VMF(N)-541 “Bat Eyes”
197: VMF(N)-542
198: VMF(N)-543 “Night Hawks”
199: VMF(N)-544
200: VMF-610
201: VMF-911 “Devil Cats”

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Top 20 US Marine Corps Fighting Squadrons

Unit	Victories	Combat Aircraft
VMF-121	205.5	F4F and F4U
VMF-221	155	F3A, F4F and F4U
VMF-112	144	F4F and F4U
VMF-215	135.5	F4U
VMF-223	132	F4F and F4U
VMF-212	126.5	F4F and F4U
VMF-214	126	F4F and F4U
VMF-323	124.5	F4U
VMF-213	113	F4U
VMF-224	110	F4F and F4U
VMF-211	91.5	F4F and F4U
VMF-124	84	F4U
VMF-311	71	F4U
VMF-312	60.5	F4U
VMF-123	58	F4F and F4U
VMF-222	53	F4U
VMF-441	49	F4F and F4U
VMF-122	48.5	F4F and F4U
VMF-321	39.67	F4U
VMF(N)-533	35	F6F

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APPENDIX 2

Top Squadrons by Aircraft

Grumman F4F Wildcat

(11 Squadrons scored in Wildcats)

VMF-121	160
VMF-223	132.5 (+22.5 TAD from other squadrons)
VMF-112	61.5
VMF-212	57
VMF-224	61.5

Vought F4U Corsair

(32 squadrons scored in Corsairs)

VMF-215	135.5
VMF-323	124.5
VMF-221	118
VMF-214	116
VMF-213	113

Nightfighter Victories

VMF(N)-533	Okinawa	35	F6F
VMF(N)-541	Philippines	23	F6F
VMF(N)-542	Okinawa	18	F6F
VMF(N)-543	Okinawa	15	F6F
VMF(N)-531	Solomons	12	PV
VMF(N)-532	CentPac	2	F4U
VMF-511	*Block Island*	1	F6F
VMFN-534	Marianas	1	F6F

Brewster F2A Buffalo Pilots

Capt William C. Humberd	VMF-221	2
2Lt Charles L. Kunz	VMF-221	2
Capt Francis P. McCarthy	VMF-221	1
Capt Philip R. White	VMF-221	1
Marine Gunner Robert L. Dickey	VMF-221	0.5
Capt James L. Neefus	VMF-221	0.5

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APPENDIX 3

US Marine Corps Medal of Honor Fighter Pilots

Recipient	Unit	Locale	Date
Capt Henry T. Elrod (KIA)	VMF-211	Wake Island	December 1941
Maj John L. Smith	VMF-223	Guadalcanal	August-October 1942
Maj Robert E. Galer	VMF-224	Guadalcanal	September-October 1942
Lt Col Harold W. Bauer (KIA)	VMF-212	Guadalcanal	August 1942
Capt Joseph J. Foss	VMF-121	Guadalcanal	October 25, 1942
1Lt Jefferson J. DeBlanc	VMF-112	Solomons	January 31, 1943
1Lt James E. Swett	VMF-221	Guadalcanal	April 7, 1943
1Lt Kenneth A. Walsh	VMF-124	Solomons	August 1943
Maj Gregory Boyington	VMF-214	Solomons	September 16, 1943
1Lt Robert M. Hanson (KIA)	VMF-215	Solomons	January 14, 1944

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APPENDIX 4

The Aces

Ranks shown as of last World War II victory. Only squadrons are listed in which victories were scored. There are 120 aces listed in total.

Name	Unit(s)	Total	Notes
Capt Donald N. Aldrich	VMF-215	20	KIFA May 1947
2Lt Stuart C. Alley Jr	VMF-323	5	
Maj George C. Axtell Jr	VMF-323	6	
Capt Robert Baird	VMF(N)-533	6	nightfighter ace
Capt Robert M. Baker	VMF-121	5	
Capt Donald L. Balch	VMF-221	5	
Capt Frank B. Baldwin	VMF-221	5	
Capt Oscar M. Bate Jr	VMF-121 and VMF-218	5	
Lt Col Harold W. Bauer	VMF-212	10	KIA November 1942
1Lt John F. Bolt Jr	VMF-214	6	+6 Korea
Maj Gregory Boyington	VMF-214	22	+2 AVG
Capt Richard L. Braun	VMF-215	5	
2Lt William P. Brown Jr	VMF-311	7	KIA Korea February 1952
Maj Marion E. Carl	VMF-221 and VMF-223	18.5	
Capt William A. Carlton	VMF-212	5	
1Lt William N. Case	VMF-112 and VMF-214	8	
2Lt Dean Caswell	VMF-221	7	
1Lt Creighton Chandler	VMF-215	6	
Capt Arthur R. Conant	VMF-215	6	
1Lt Jack E. Conger	VMF-212	10	
Capt William E. Crowe	VMF-124	7	
Capt James N. Cupp	VMF-213	12	
Maj Leonard K. Davis	VMF-121	5	
Capt Jefferson J. DeBlanc	VMF-112 and VMF-422	9	
1Lt Phillip C. DeLong	VMF-212	11.666	+2 Korea
1Lt Joseph V. Dillard	VMF-323	6.333	

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Name	Unit(s)	Total	Notes
1Lt Eugene Dillow	VMF-221	6	
Maj John F. Dobbin	VMF-224	7.5	
Maj Archie G. Donahue	VMF-112 and VMF-451	14	
Maj Jefferson D. Dorroh	VMF-323	6	
2Lt Cecil J. Doyle	VMF-121	5	KIA November1942
2Lt Charles W. Drake	VMF-323	5	
Capt Frank C. Drury	VMF-212 and VMF-123	6	
2Lt Dewey F. Durnford	VMF-323	6.333	+0.5 Korea
Maj Hugh M. Elwood	VMF-212	5.166	
Maj Loren D. Everton	VMF-212 and VMF-113	10	
1Lt William Farrell	VMF-312	5	
Capt Howard J. Finn	VMF-124	6	
1Lt Don H. Fisher	VMF-214	6	
Maj Paul J. Fontana	VMF-112	5	
Capt Kenneth M. Ford	VMF-121	5	
Capt Joseph J. Foss	VMF-121	26	
Maj Robert B. Fraser	VMF-112	6	KIFA June 1945
Capt Kenneth D. Frazier	VMF-223	13.5	
2Lt William B. Freeman	VMF-121	6	
Maj Robert E. Galer	VMF-224	13	
Capt Fred E. Gutt	VMF-223	8	
2Lt Roger A. Haberman	VMF-121	6.5	
1Lt Albert E. Hacking Jr	VMF-221	5	
1Lt Sheldon O. Hall	VMF-213	6	
Mar Gun Henry B. Hamilton	VMF-223 and VMF-212	7	KIA October 1942
Maj Herman Hansen Jr	VMF-122 and VMF-112	5.5	
1Lt Robert M. Hanson	VMF-214 and VMF-215	25	KIA February 1944
1Lt Edwin J. Hernan Jr	VMF-215	8	KIA Korea July 1951
2Lt George L. Hollowell	VMF-224	8	
1Lt William L. Hood Jr	VMF-323	5.5	

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1Lt John C Hundley	VMF-211	6	
Maj Julius W. Ireland	VMF-211	5.333	
1Lt Alvin J. Jensen	VMF-214 and VMF-441	7	KIFA May 1949
2Lt Charles D. Jones	VMF-222	6	
2Lt Charles Kendrick	VMF-223	5	KIA October 1942
Capt Floyd Kirkpatrick	VMF-441	5.5	
2Lt Charles M. Kunz	VMF-221 and VMF-224	8	
Capt Gregory K. Loesch	VMF-121	8.5	
Maj Herbert H. Long	VMF-121, VMF-122 and VMF-451	10	
Capt Joseph J. Lynch	VMF-112 and VMF-224	5.5	
Maj John B. Maas Jr	VMF-112 and VMF-322	5.5	
1Lt Christopher L. Magee	VMF-214	9	
2Lt Thomas H. Mann Jr	VMF-224 and VMF-121	9	
1Lt William P. Marontate	VMF-121	13	KIA January 1943
1Lt Henry McCartney	VMO-251, VMF-121 and VMF-214	5	
1Lt Robert W. McClurg	VMF-214	7	
1Lt Selva E. McGinty	VMF-441	5	
1Lt John McManus	VMF-221	6	
1Lt John L. Morgan Jr	VMF-213	8.5	
1Lt Paul A. Mullen	VMF-122, VMF-112 and VMF-214	6.5	
2Lt Joseph L. Narr	VMF-121	7	KIA November 1942
1Lt Jeremiah J. O'Keefe	VMF-323	7	
Capt Edwin L. Olander	VMF-214	5	
Capt Donald C. Owen	VMF-121 and VMF-112	5	
Maj Robert G. Owens Jr	VMF-215	7	

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Name	Unit(s)	Total	Notes
Maj Frederick R. Payne	VMF-223 and VMF-212	5.5	
1Lt James G. Percy	VMF-112	6	
2Lt Hyde Phillips	VMF-223	5	
Capt Francis E. Pierce Jr	VMF-121	6	
2Lt Jack Pittman Jr	VMF-221	5	
2Lt Zenneth A. Pond	VMF-223	6	KIA September 1942
Maj Robert B. Porter	VMF-221 and VMF(N)-542	5	
Maj George H. Poske	VMF-212	5	
Maj Nathan T. Post Jr	VMF-122 and VMF-221	8	
Capt Ernest A. Powell	VMF-122	5	
Maj Joseph H. Reinburg	VMF-121 and VMF-122	7	
1Lt John W. Ruhsam	VMF-323	7	
Maj Donald H. Sapp	VMF-222	10	
1Lt Hartwell V. Scarborough	VMF-224	5	
1Lt Robert B. See	VMF-121	5	
1Lt Harold E. Segal	VMF-221 and VMF-211	12	
1Lt Edward O. Shaw	VMF-213	14.5	KIFA July 1944
Capt Perry L. Shuman	VMF-121	6	
Capt Wallace E. Sigler	VMF-112, VMF-124 and VMF(N)-542	5	
Maj John L. Smith	VMF-223	19	
Capt William N. Snider	VMF-221	11.5	
Capt Harold L. Spears	VMF-215	15	KIFA December 1944
1Lt Robert F. Stout	VMF-224 and VMF-212	6	KIA March 1945
Capt James E. Swett	VMF-221	15.5	
1Lt Stanley T. Synar	VMF-112	5	
1Lt Francis A. Terrill	VMF-323	6.083	KIFA January 1946
1Lt Franklin C. Thomas	VMF-211		9
Capt Wilbur J. Thomas	VMF-213	18.5	KIFA January 47

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2Lt Eugene A. Trowbridge	VMF-223	6	
Capt Herbert J. Valentine	VMF-312	6	
1Lt Milton N. Vedder	VMF-213	6	Died February 1944
1Lt Robert Wade	VMF-323	7	
Capt Kenneth A. Walsh	VMF-124 and VMF-222	21	
Maj Arthur T. Warner	VMF-215	8	
Maj Gregory J. Weissengberger	VMF-213	5	
1Lt Albert P. Wells	VMF-323	5	
1Lt Gerard M. H. Williams	VMF-215	7	
Maj Donald K. Yost	VMF-121 and VMF-351	8	
Maj Michael R. Yunck	VMO-251 and VMF-311	5	

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APPENDIX 5

Aces per Squadron

Pilots with five victories in the squadron listed

VMF-121	15
VMF-323	12
VMF-221	11
VMF-212	10
VMF-214	10
VMF-215	10
VMF-223	8
VMF-213	7
VMF-112	6
VMF-224	4
VMF-124	3
VMF-211	3
VMF-222	2
VMF-312	2
VMF-441	2
VMF-122	1
VMF-311	1
VMF-321	1
VMF-451	1
VMF(N)-533	1

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APPENDIX 6

US Marine Corps Double Aces

Name	Unit(s)	Total	Notes
Capt Joseph J. Foss	VMF-121	26	
1Lt Robert M. Hanson	VMF-214 and VMF-215	25	KIA
Maj Gregory Boyington	VMF-214	22	PoW and +2 AVG
Capt Kenneth A. Walsh	VMF-214 and VMF-222	21	
Capt Donald N. Aldrich	VMF-215	20	
Maj John L. Smith	VMF-223	19	
Maj Marion E. Carl	VMF-221 and VMF-223	18.5	
Capt Wilbur J. Thomas	VMF-213	18.5	
Capt James E. Swett	VMF-221	15.5	
Capt Harold L. Spears	VMF-225	15	
1Lt Edward O. Shaw	VMF-213	14.5	
Maj Archie G. Donahue	VMF-112 and VMF-451	14	
Capt Kenneth D. Frazier	VMF-223	13.5	
Maj Robert E. Galer	VMF-224	13	
1Lt William P. Marontate	VMF-121	13	KIA
Capt James N. Cupp	VMF-213	12	
Maj Loren D. Everton	VMF-212 and VMF-113	12	
1Lt Harold E. Segal	VMF-221 and VMF-211	12	
Capt Philip C. DeLong	VMF-212	11.666	+2 Korea
Capt William N. Snider	VMF-221	11.5	
Lt Col Harold W. Bauer	VMF-212	10	KIA
1Lt Jack E. Conger	VMF-212	10	
Capt Herbert H. Long	VMF-121, VMF-122 and VMF-451	10	

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APPENDIX 7

First 25 US Marine Corps Aces

Ranking	Name	Unit(s)	Date (all 1942)
1.	Capt Marion E. Carl	VMF-221 and VMF-223	24 August
2.	Maj John L. Smith	VMF-223	August 29
3.	2Lt Kenneth D. Frazier	VMF-223	August 30
	2Lt Zenneth A. Pond	VMF-223	August 30
5.	2Lt Charles Kendrick	VMF-223	September 9
6.	Maj Robert L. Galer	VMF-224	September 11
7.	2Lt Charles M. Kunz	VMF-221 and VMF-224	September 12
	2Lt Eugene A. Trowbridge	VMF-223	September 12
9.	Maj John F. Dobbin	VMF-224	September 14
	2Lt George L. Hollowell	VMF-224	September 14
11.	Lt Col Harold W. Bauer	VMF-212	October 3
12.	Capt Loren D. Everton	VMF-212	October 18
	Capt Joseph J. Foss	VMF-121	October 18
	Gunner Henry B. Hamilton	VMF-223 and VMF-212	October 18
15.	2Lt Roger A. Haberman	VMF-121	October 23
16.	Maj Leonard K. Davis	VMF-121	October 25
	2Lt Cecil J. Doyle	VMF-121	October 25
	2Lt Joseph L. Narr	VMF-121	October 25
	1Lt Robert F. Stout	VMF-212 and VMF-224	October 25
20.	1Lt Frank C. Drury	VMF-212	October 30
	2Lt William B Freeman	VMF-121	October 30
22.	2Lt William P. Marontate	VMF-121	November 7
23.	1Lt Gregory K. Loesch	VMF-121	November 11
24.	Maj Paul J. Fontana	VMF-112	November 14
25.	Maj Donald K. Yost	VMF-121	December 24

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APPENDIX 8

Leading US Marine Corps Aces

Name	Unit	Score	Date
Capt Marion E. Carl	VMF-223	5	August 24, 1942
Capt Marion E. Carl	VMF-223	8	August 29, 1942
Maj John L. Smith	VMF-223	9	August 30, 1942
Maj John L. Smith	VMF-223	19	October 10, 1942
Capt Joseph J. Foss	VMF-121	19	November 7, 1942
Capt Joseph J. Foss	VMF-121	21	November 12, 1942
Capt Joseph J. Foss	VMF-121	26	January 15, 1943
Maj Gregory Boyington	VMF-214	28*	January 3, 1944

* Postwar, the American Fighter Aces Association credited Boyington with 22 victories as a Marine plus two with the AVG for a total of 24

APPENDIX 9

US Marine Corps Aces in a Day

Name	Unit	Fighter Type	Score	Date
Capt Joseph J. Foss	VMF-121	F4F	5	October 25, 1942
1Lt Jefferson J. DeBlanc	VMF-112	F4F	5	January 31, 1943
1Lt James E. Swett	VMF-221	F4F	7	April 7, 1943
Maj Gregory Boyington	VMF-214	F4U	5	September 16, 1943
1Lt Robert M. Hanson	VMF-225	F4U	5	January 14, 1944
Maj Arch Donahue	VMF-451	F4U	5	April 12, 1945
Maj Jefferson D. Dorroh	VMF-323	F4U	6	April 22, 1945
Maj George C. Axtell	VMF-323	F4U	5	April 22, 1945
1Lt Jeremiah O'Keefe	VMF-323	F4U	5	April 22, 1945
Capt Herbert J. Valentine	VMF-312	F4U	5.5	May 25, 1945

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APPENDIX 10

Carrier Fighter Squadron Victory Totals

Unit	Carrier	Total
VMF-221	*Bunker Hill*	66
VMF-112	*Bennington*	54.5
VMF-451	*Bunker Hill*	34
VMF-123	*Bennington*	29
VMF-124	*Essex*	15
VMF-213	*Essex*	8
VMF-351	*Cape Gloucester*	5
VMF-452	*Franklin*	4
VMF-217	*Wasp*	3
VMF-216	*Wasp*	1
VMF-511	*Block Island*	1
VMF-512	*Gilbert Islands*	1
VMF-214	*Franklin*	0
VMF-513	*Vella Gulf*	0
Total		221.5

APPENDIX 11

Top-Scoring US Marine Corps Carrier Pilots

Name	Unit	Carrier	Score
2Lt Dean Caswell	VMF-221	*Bunker Hill*	7
Capt William N. Snider	VMF-221	*Bunker Hill*	6.5 (+5 on land)
1Lt John McManus	VMF-221	*Bunker Hill*	6
Maj Archie Donahue	VMF-451	*Bunker Hill*	5 (+9 on land)
Maj Herman Hansen	VMF-112	*Bennington*	4.5 (+1 on land)
Maj Herbert H. Long	VMF-451	*Bunker Hill*	4 (+6 on land)

24.5 kills by four aces among 221.5 total victories by carrier pilots

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APPENDIX 12

US Marine Corps Aces who Died in World War II

Name	Unit	Date of Death
2Lt Zenneth R. Pond	VMF-223	KIA September 10, 1942
2Lt Charles Kendrick	VMF-223	KIA October 2, 1942
Mac Gun Henry B. Hamilton	VMF-223	KIA October 21, 1942
2Lt Cecil J. Doyle	VMF-121	KIA November 7, 1942
2Lt Joseph L. Narr	VMF-121	KIA November 11, 1942
Lt Col Harold W. Bauer	VMF-212	KIA November 14, 1942
1Lt William P. Marontate	VMF-121	KIA January 15, 1943
Capt Ernest A. Powell	VMF-122	MIA July 18, 1943
Capt Gregory K. Loesch	VMF-115	KIFA September 27, 1943
1Lt Robert M. Hanson	VMF-215	KIA February 3, 1944
1Lt Milton N. Vedder	VMF-213	Died February 11, 1944
Capt Edward O. Shaw	VMF-213	KIFA July 31, 1944
Capt Harold L. Spears	VMF-215	KIFA December 6, 1944
Maj Robert F. Stout	VMF-114	KIA March 4, 1945
Capt John L. Morgan Jr	VMF-213	KIA March 26, 1945
Maj Robert B. Fraser	MCVG-7	KIFA June 18, 1945

Sixteen lost of 120 total (13.3 percent). W. P. Brown, E. J. Herman and H. Phillips were killed in Korea.

APPENDIX 13

Aces by Aircraft Type

F4U	69 (70 – Swett made ace in F4F and F4U)
F4F	32 (33 – Swett made ace in F4F and F4U)
F4F/F4U combined	15
F4U/F6F combined	2 (Porter and Sigler)
F6F	1 (Baird)
F4F and F4U	1 (Swett)

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APPENDIX 14

Leading US Marine Corps Pilots by Aircraft Type

Brewster F2A Buffalo

Capt William Humberd	VMF-221	2
2Lt Charles M. Kunz	VMF-221	2 (+6 in F4F)
Capt Frances P. McCarthy	VMF-221	1
Capt Philip R. White	VMF-221	1
Capt James L. Neefus	VMF-221	0.5
Mar Gun Robert L. Dickey	VMF-221	0.5

Grumman F4F Wildcat

Capt Joseph J. Foss	VMF-121	26
Maj John L. Smith	VMF-223	19
Capt Marion E. Carl	VMF-221 and VMF-223	16.5 (+2 in F4U)
Maj Robert E. Galer	VMF-224	13
1Lt William P. Marontate	VMF-121	13 (KIA January 1943)

Grumman F6F Hellcat

Capt Robert Baird	VMF(N)-533	6
TSgt John W. Andre	VMF(N)-541	4
1Lt Harold T. Hayes	VMF(N)-541	4
1Lt. Albert F. Dellamano	VMF(N)-533	3
2Lt Gordon L. Coles	VMF(N)-542	2.5

Lockheed PV-1 Ventura

Lt Col John D. Harshberger	VMF(N)-531	4
Lt Col Frank H. Schwable	VMF(N)-531	4
Capt D. R. Jenkins	VMF(N)-531	2
1Lt M. E. Notestine	VMF(N)-531	1
1Lt Jack Plunkett	VMF(N)-531	1

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Vought F4U Corsair

1Lt Robert M. Hanson	VMF-214 and VMF-225	25 (KIA February 1944)
Maj Gregory Boyington	VMF-214	22 (PoW January 1944)
1Lt Kenneth A. Walsh	VMF-124 and VMF-222	21
Capt Donald N. Aldrich	VMF-225	20
Capt Wilbur J. Thomas	VMF-213	18.5

APPENDIX 15

US Marine Corps Nightfighter Squadron Scores

VMF(N)-533	Okinawa 1945	F6F	35
VMF(N)-541	Palau, Philippines 1944-45	F6F	23
VMF(N)-542	Okinawa 1945	F6F	18
VMF(N)-543	Okinawa 1945	F6F	15
VMF(N)-531	Solomons 1943-44	PV	12
VMF(N)-532	Central Pacific 1944	F4U	2
VMF(N)-534	Marianas 1945	F6F	1
VMF-511	Southwest Pacific 1945	F6F	1*

* Squadron's only victory was by a Night Hellcat

APPENDIX 16

Top US Marine Corps Nightfighter Pilots

(Not all victories were at night)

Capt Robert Baird	VMF(N)-533	F6F	6
TSgt John W. Andre	VMF(N)-541	F6F	4 (+1 Korea)
1Lt Harold T. Hayes	VMF(N)-541	F6F	4
Lt Col Frank H. Schwable	VMF(N)-531	PV	4
Lt Col John D. Harshberger	VMF(N)-531	PV	4
1Lt Albert F. Dellamano	VMF(N)-533	F6F	3

Top six pilots got 25 of 107 nightfighter victories (23 per cent)

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APPENDIX 17

Highest Daily Fighter Claims

Date	Location	Destroyed-Probables-Damaged
April 12, 1945	Okinawa	77-5-10
June 30, 1943	Solomons	65-14-2
May 4, 1945	Okinawa	60.75-1-12
January 23, 1944	Solomons	59-13-5
April 28, 1945	Okinawa	52-1-0
April 16, 1945	Okinawa	46-0-0
May 25, 1945	Okinawa	42-4-6
June 22, 1945	Okinawa	40-6-1
July 17, 1943	Solomons	40-0-3
April 22, 1945	Okinawa	33-6-1

APPENDIX 18

Highest Daily Squadron Claims

Unit	Destroyed-Probables-Damaged	Location	Date
VMF-323	24.75-0-10	Okinawa	May 4, 1945
VMF-323	24.50-3-6	Okinawa	April 22, 1945
VMF-213	20-1-0	Solomons	June 30, 1943
VMF-223	20-0-0	Solomons	August 24, 1942
VMF-215	19-6-0	Solomons	January 14, 1944
VMF-121	19-3-0	Solomons	June 30, 1943
VMF-221	18-3-1	Solomons	April 7, 1943
VMF-112	18-0-5	Okinawa	April 12, 1945
VMF-221	17-8-2	Solomons	June 30, 1943
VMF-121	17-0-0	Solomons	October 25, 1942

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APPENDIX 19

Miscellany

First victory
2Lt D. D. Kliewer and TSgt W. J. Hamilton of VMF-211 on December 9, 1941

Last victory
2Lt W. E. Jennings of VMF(N)-542 on August 8, 1945

First ace
Capt Marion E. Carl of VMF-223 on August 24, 1942

Last ace
Lt Col Donald K. Yost of VMF-351 on August 5, 1945

Oldest ace
Capt William A. Carlton of VMF-212, aged 37 years, 6 months and 14 days

Youngest ace
2Lt William L. Hood of VMF-323, aged 20 years, 11 months and 21 days

First Nightfighter Victory
Capt D. R. Jenkins of VMF(N)-531 on November 13, 1943

Only Nightfighter Ace
Capt Robert Baird of VMF(N)-533 on June 22, 1945

Second Lieutenant Aces

Name	Unit	Score	Notes
Stuart C. Alley Jr	VMF-323	5	
William P. Brown Jr	VMF-311	7	
Dean Caswell	VMF-221	7	
Cecil J. Doyle	VMF-121	5	KIA November 1942
Charles W. Drake	VMF-323	5	
Dewey F. Durnford	VMF-323	6.333 (+ 0.5 Korea)	
William B. Freeman	VMF-121	6	
Roger A. Haberman	VMF-121	6.5	
George L. Hollowell	VMF-224	8	
Charles D. Jones	VMF-222	6	
Charles Kendrick	VMF-223	5	KIA October 1942

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Charles M. Kunz	VMF-221 and VMF-224	8	
Thomas H. Mann Jr	VMF-224 and VMF-121	9	
Joseph L. Narr	VMF-121	7	
Hyde Phillips	VMF-223	5	
Jack Pittman Jr	VMF-221	5	
Zenneth A. Pond	VMF-223	6	KIA September 1942
Eugene A. Trowbridge	VMF-223	6	

"Confirmation Pending"

1Lt Wayne E. Laird	VMF-112	4.5 (5)
Capt William M. Lundin	VMF-121 and VMF-122	4.5
1Lt Frank H. Presley	VMF-121	4.5 (5)
Capt Raymond F. Scherer	VMF-311	4.5 (5)

(5) indicates that the pilot has been listed with five victories in some sources

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APPENDIX 20

US Marine Corps Fighter Squadrons deployed during World War II (six-month intervals)

This compilation of US Marine Corps fighter squadrons deployed outside the ConUS from 1941 to 1945 has probably never appeared in print before. It represents research from a variety of sources, but the primary reference is the US Navy location and allowance of aircraft reports, issued monthly or more frequently throughout the war. The editions in the author's file came from the late Richard M. Hill, a former Naval Aviator and devoted researcher. Additional reports are accessible online at the Naval Aviation History website.

Some omissions and errors were noted and corrected where possible. For instance, two sources might show a Marine Air Group at different bases. When in doubt I have used the location of the headquarters squadron ("HedRon") from the monthly reports as the most immediate. Additional sources are Sherrod's classic history of Marine Corps aviation in World War II and specific reports from squadrons in the author's possession.

The list includes units inside the ConUS for December 1941 and September 1945.

Where applicable, similar aircraft types are listed in numerical precedence. For example, "F4U-1/1D, FG-1D" indicates more Vought built Corsairs than Goodyear.

Non-fighter units are beyond the scope of this study, so bomber, transport and observation squadrons are omitted. Consequently, some Marine Air Groups are omitted as well. However, the torpedo-bomber squadrons assigned to Marine carrier air groups are included for handy reference.

US Marine Corps Fighter Squadrons

December 6, 1941

1st Marine Aircraft Wing		**Quantico**
VMF-111	15 F4F-3A, 2 SNJ-3	New Berne, NC
VMF-112	20 F4F-3, 2 SNJ-3	Quantico

2nd Marine Aircraft Wing		**San Diego**
VMF-211	12 F4F-3	Wake Island
	10 F4F-3, 1 SNJ	Ewa
VMF-221	14 F2A-3	*Saratoga*

US Marine Corps Fighter Squadrons deployed June 4, 1942

2nd Marine Aircraft Wing		**San Diego**
Marine Air Group 21		Ewa
VMF-211	14 F2A-3	Palmyra

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VMF-212	20 F4F-3A, 1 J2F	Tontouta
Marine Air Group 22		Midway
VMF-221	21 F2A-3, 7 F4F-3	Midway
Marine Air Group 23		Ewa
VMF-222	9 F2A-3, 2 SNJ-3	Ewa
VMF-223	6 F2A-3, 1 SNJ-3	Ewa
VMF-224	6 F2A-3	Ewa

US Marine Corps Fighter Squadrons deployed December 8, 1942

1st Marine Aircraft Wing		**San Diego**
VMF-121	–	en route US
VMO-251	12 F4F-3P, 9 F4F-4	Noumea
	2 SNJ-3, 1 J2F-5	
VMF-212	–	en route US
VMF-223	–	en route US
VMF-224	–	en route US
4th Marine Aircraft Wing		**Pearl Harbor**
Marine Air Group 21		Ewa
VMF-211	12 F4F-4, 2 SNJ-3	Palmyra
VMF-213	4 F4F-3/4, 1 F4F-7	Hawaii
VMF-214	5 F4F-3	Hawaii
Marine Air Group 22		Midway
VMF-221	3 F4F-3/4	Hawaii
Marine Air Group 13		Samoa
VMF-111	6 F4F-3, 1 J2F-5	Samoa
VMF-441	17 F4F-3	Samoa

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US Marine Corps Fighter Squadrons deployed June 8, 1943

1st Marine Aircraft Wing		**Espiritu Santo**
Marine Air Group 11		Espiritu Santo
VMF-112	35 F4U-1	Guadalcanal
VMF-121	–	Auckland, NZ
VMF-123	20 F4F-4, 3 F4F-3P	Efate
VMF-213	–	Espiritu Santo
Marine Air Group 12		Guadalcanal
VMF-122	23 F4F-4	Guadalcanal
VMF-124	44 F4U-1	Guadalcanal
Marine Air Group 21		Russells
VMF-214	F4F-4	Russells
VMF-221	F4F-4	Russells
2nd Marine Aircraft Wing		**Auckland**
HedRon only		
4th Marine Base Defense Air Wing		**Ewa**
VMF-211	7 F4F, 12 SBD	Palmyra
(MAG unknown)		
VMF-212	10 F4U-1	Tontouta
(probably 4th Marine Base Defense Air Wing, MAG unknown)		
Marine Air Group 13		Samoa
VMF-111	16 F4F-4	Upolu
VMF-441	17 F4F-4	Funafuti
Marine Air Group 22		Midway
VMF-215	18 F4U-1	Midway
Marine Air Group 24		Hawaii
VMF-222	16 F4U-1	Midway

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US Marine Corps Fighter Squadrons deployed December 7, 1943

Marine Aircraft South Pacific		**Espiritu Santo(?)**
VMF-216	20 F4U-1	Russells
VMF-223	? F4U-1	Efate
1st Marine Aircraft Wing		**Espiritu Santo**
Marine Air Group 11		Espiritu Santo
VMF-211	24 F4U-1	Espiritu Santo
VMF-212	20 F4U-1	Vella Lavella
VMF-213	14 F4U-1	Espiritu Santo
VMF-214	23 F4U-1	Espiritu Santo
Marine Air Group 14		Munda
VMF-215	20 F4U-1	Vella Lavella
VMF-222	20 F4U-1	Vella Lavella
VMF(N)-531	5 PV-1N	Russells
Marine Air Group 21		Russells
VMF-123	–	en route to US
Marine Air Group 24		Russells
VMF-221	30 F4U-1	Efate
4th Marine Base Defense Air Wing		**Tutuila**
Marine Air Group 13		Tutuila
VMF-111	24 F4F-4, FM-1	Nukufetau
VMF-224	26 F4U-1	Funafuti
VMF-441	22 F4F-4, FM-1	Nanomea
Marine Air Group 31		Wallis Island
VMF-311	17 F4U-1	Wallis Island

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Marine Air Hawaiian Area		**Ewa**
VMF-111	20 F4U-1	Ewa
VMF-225	13 F4U-1	Ewa
Marine Air Group 22		Midway
VMF-422	20 F4U-1	Midway

US Marine Corps Fighter Squadrons deployed June 13, 1944

Marine Aircraft South Pacific		**Espiritu Santo**
VMF-115	21 F4U-1	Espiritu Santo
VMF(N)-531	8 PV-1N, 2 F4F, 1 F6F	Torokina
1st Marine Aircraft Wing		**Guadalcanal**
VMO-251	26 F4U-1	Espiritu Santo
Marine Air Group 12		Emirau
VMF-211	22 F4U-1	Espiritu Santo
Marine Air Group 14		Green Island
VMF-212	30 F4U-1	Espiritu Santo
VMF-218	19 F4U-1	Green Island
VMF-222	21 F4U-1	Emirau
VMF-223	24 F4U-1	Green Island
2nd Marine Aircraft Wing		**Efate**
Marine Air Group 21		Efate
VMF-216	22 F4U-1	Efate
VMF-321	21 F4U-1	Efate
3rd Marine Aircraft Wing		**Ewa**
Marine Air Group 23		Midway
VMF-313	24 F4U-1	Midway
VMO-155	24 F4U-1	Midway
Marine Air Group 32		Ewa
VMF-312	21 F4U-1	Ewa

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VMF-322	21 F4U-1	Ewa

Fourth Marine Base Defense Air Wing		**Majuro Atoll**
Marine Air Group 22		Engebi
VMF-113	21 F4U-1	Engebi
VMF-422	20 F4U-1	Engebi
VMF(N)-533	15 F6F-3N	Eniwetok
Marine Air Group 31		Roi
VMF-111	22 F4U-1	Makin Island
VMF-224	23 F4U-1	Roi-Namur
VMF-331	23 F4U-1	Roi-Namur
VMF-441	22 F4U-1	Roi-Namur
VMF(N)-532	5 F4U-2	Roi-Namur
VMF(N)-532	6 F4U-2	Engebi

US Marine Corps Fighter Squadrons deployed December 12, 1944

1st Marine Aircraft Wing		**Torokina**
Marine Air Group 12		Emirau
VMF-115	21 FG-1A, F4U-1	Leyte
VMF-211	22 F4U-1D	Leyte
VMF-218	15 FG-1A, F4U-1	Leyte
VMF-313	22 FG-1A	Leyte
Marine Air Group 14		Green Island
VMF-212	21 FG-1A, F4U-1	Torokina
VMF-222	12 FG-1A, F4U-1	Green Island
VMF-223	32 FG-1A, F4U-1	Torokina
VMO-251	23 F4U-1D	Torokina

2nd Marine Aircraft Wing		**Emirau/Ewa**
Marine Air Group 11		Peleliu
VMF-114	22 F4U-1/1C	Peleliu
VMF-121	19 FG-1A	Peleliu
VMF-122	23 FG-1, F4U-1	Peleliu

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VMF(N)-541	13 F6F-3N/5N	Leyte
Marine Air Group 33		Espiritu Santo
VMF-312	22 F4U-1D	Ulithi
VMF-322	24 F4U-1D	Emirau
VMF-323	24 F4U-1D	Emirau
Marine Air Group 45		Ulithi
VMF(N)-542	15 F6F-3N/5N	Ulithi
3rd Marine Aircraft Wing		**Ewa**
VMF-124	30 F4U-1, FG-1A, 2 SBD	Ewa
VMF-213	25 F4U-1, FG-1A, 2 SBD	Ewa
VMF-333	23 F4U-1D	Ewa
Marine Air Group 23		Midway
VMF-314	20 F4U-1	Midway
VMF-324	22 F4U-1	Midway
4th Marine Aircraft Wing		**Majuro**
Marine Air Group 13		Majuro
VMBF-231	24 F4U-1D, 2 SBD-5	Majuro
VMBF-331	24 F4U-1D, 2 SBD-5	Majuro
Marine Air Group 21		Guam
VMF-216	21 F4U-1/1D	Guam
VMF-217	22 F4U-1/1D	Guam
VMF-225	22 F4U-1/1D	Guam
VMF-321	23 F4U-1/1D	Guam
VMF(N)-534	14 F6F-3N	Guam
Marine Air Group 22		Engebi
VMF-113	23 F4U-1/1D, 2 SBD-5	Engebi
VMF-422	24 F4U-1/1D, 2 SBD-5	Engebi

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VMF(N)-533	11 F6F-3N/5N, 1 SBD-5	Eniwetok
VMF(N)-533	4 F6F-3N/5N	Roi-Namur
Marine Air Group 31		Roi-Namur
VMF-111	24 F4U-1, 1 SBD-5	Roi-Namur
VMF-224	24 F4U-1/1D, 2 SBD-5	Roi-Namur
VMF-311	24 F4U-1, 2 SBD-5	Roi-Namur
VMF-441	24 F4U-1D, 2 SBD-5	Roi-Namur
VMO-155	22 F4U-1D, 2 SBD-5	Kwajalein

US Marine Corps Fighter Squadrons deployed June 16, 1945

Squadrons assigned to Marine Carriers

Marine Air Support Group 44		Ewa
VMF-215	34 FG-1, F4U-1/C/D, 8 F6F-5	Ewa
Marine Air Support Group 48		Ewa
Marine Carrier Air Group 1		USS *Block Island*, WestPac
VMF-511	8 F4U/FG-1D, 7 F6F-5N/5P	aboard
VMTB-233	11 TBM-3, 1 TBM-3P	aboard
Marine Carrier Air Group 2		USS *Gilbert Islands*, WestPac
VMF-512	17 FG/F4U-1D, 2 F6F-5P	aboard
VMTB-143	12 TBM-3	aboard
Marine Carrier Air Group 3		USS *Vella Gulf*, San Diego
VMF-513	16 F4U-1D, 1 F6F-5P	aboard
VMTB-234	12 TBM-3E	aboard
Marine Carrier Air Group 4		USS *Cape Gloucester*, Pearl Harbor
VMF-351	15 FG-1D, 2 F6F-5	aboard

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VMTB-132	11 TBM-3E	aboard
1st Marine Aircraft Wing		**Torokina, Bougainville**
Marine Air Group 12		Mindanao
VMF-115	21 FG-1/1D, F4U-1D	Mindanao
VMF-211	23 F4U-1D	Mindanao
VMF-218	21 FG-1, F4U-1D	Mindanao
2nd Marine Aircraft Wing		**Okinawa**
Marine Air Group 14		en route Okinawa
VMF-212	13 FG-1	Okinawa
VMF-222	15 F4U-1/1D, FG-1	Okinawa
VMF-223	17 F4U-1D, FG-1	Okinawa
Marine Air Group 22		Ie Shima
VMF-113	31 F4U-1D	Ie Shima
VMF-314	15 F4U-1C	Ie Shima
VMF-422	31 F4U-1D	Ie Shima
VMF(N)-533	14 F6F-5N	Ie Shima
Marine Air Group 31		Yontan, Okinawa
VMF-224	34 F4U-1D, FG-1D	Yontan
VMF-311	39 F4U-1C	Yontan
VMF-441	29 F4U-1/1D	Yontan
Marine Air Group 33		Kadena, Okinawa
VMF-312	27 F4U-1D, FG-1D	Kadena
VMF-322	28 FG-1D, F4U-1D	Kadena
VMF-323	35 FG-1D, F4U-1D	Kadena
VMF(N)-543	13 F6F-5N	Kadena
3rd Marine Aircraft Wing		**Ewa**
Marine Air Group 23		Midway
VMF-324	27 FG-1	Midway

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4th Marine Aircraft Wing		**Kwajalein**
Marine Air Group 11		Peleliu
VMF-114	23 FG-1/1D, F4U-1/1D	Peleliu
VMF-121	24 FG-1/1D, F4U-1D	Peleliu
VMF-122	24 F4U-1D, FG-1D	Peleliu
VMF(N)-541	15 F6F-5N, F6F-3N/5N	Peleliu
Marine Air Group 45		Ulithi
VMF-111	12 F4U-1/1D, 3 SBD-6	Eniwetok
VMF-111	6 F4U-1D	Majuro
VMF-111	4 F4U-1D	Roi-Namur
VMF-155	23 F4U-1D, 2 SBD-6	Kwajalein

All US Marine Corps Fighter Squadrons September 7, 1945

Squadrons Assigned to Marine Carriers

Marine Air Support Group 42		El Centro
VMF-112	1 TBF-1	El Centro
VMF-123	1 TBF-1	El Centro
VMF-221	1 TBF-1	El Centro
VMF-451	1 TBF-1	El Centro
Marine Carrier Air Group 15		El Centro
VMF-214	11 F6F-3/5, 2 SBW-4, 1 TBF	El Centro
VMTB-231	12 TBM-3E, TBF-1	El Centro
Marine Carrier Air Group 16		El Centro
VMF-452	11 F6F-3/5, 2 SBW-4, 1 TBF	El Centro
VMTB-473	10 TBM-3E, TBF-1	El Centro
Marine Air Support Group 44		Ewa
VMF-215	21 F4U-1D, FG-1/1D, F4U-4	Ewa
VMF-215	14 F6F-5/5P	
Marine Air Support Group 46		El Toro
VMF-462	16 F6F-3/5, 6 FG-1	El Toro

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VMF-471	17 F6F-3, 5 FG-1	El Toro
Marine Carrier Air Group 11		El Toro
VMF-217	18 FG-1, F4U-1, F3A-1	El Toro
VMTB-464	12 TBM-3E	El Toro
Marine Carrier Air Group 12		El Toro
VMF-461	18 FG-1A, 2 F6F-5	El Toro
VMTB-464	12 TBM-3E	El Toro
Marine Air Support Group 48		Ewa
Marine Carrier Air Group 1		USS *Block Island*, Southwest Pacific
VMF-511	9 FG-1D, 10 F6F-5N/P	aboard
VMTB-233	12 TBM-3/3E/3P	aboard
Marine Carrier Air Group 2		USS *Gilbert Islands*, WestPac
VMF-512	17 FG-1D, F4U-1D, 2 F6F-5P	aboard
VMTB-143	12 TBM-3/3E	aboard
Marine Carrier Air Group 3		USS *Vella Gulf*, WestPac
VMF-513	16 FG-1D, 2 F6F-5P	aboard
VMTB-234	12 TBM-3E	aboard
Marine Carrier Air Group 4		USS *Cape Gloucester*, WestPac
VMF-351	18 FG-1D, 2 F6F-5P aboard	
VMTB-132	12 TBM-3E	aboard
Marine Carrier Air Group 5		Pearl Harbor
VMF-514	16 F6F-5, 2 F6F-5P	Ewa
VMTB-144	12 TBM-3E	Ewa
Marine Carrier Air Group 6		Puget Sound

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VMF-321	18 F6F-3/5	aboard
VMTB-454	12 TBM-3E	aboard
Marine Carrier Air Group 7		Ewa
VMF-472	F6Fs in August	Ewa
VMTB-621	TBMs in August	Ewa
Marine Carrier Air Group 8		Mojave
VMF-124	17 F6F-3/3P/5	Mojave
VMTB-622	12 TBM-3E	Mojave
Marine Carrier Air Group 9		Santa Barbara
VMF-213	17 F6F-3/5	Santa Barbara
VMTB-623	12 TBM-3	Santa Barbara
Marine Carrier Air Group 10		Mojave
VMF-216	18 F6F-3/5	Mojave
VMTB-624	12 TBM-3E	Mojave
Marine Carrier Air Group 13		Mojave
VMF-225	18 F6F-3/5	Mojave
VMTB-151	11 TBM-3E	Mojave
Marine Carrier Air Group 14		Santa Barbara
VMF-114	?	Santa Barbara
VMTB-463	10 TBM-3/3E, TBF-1	Santa Barbara
Marine Carrier Air Group 17		Santa Barbara
VMF-481	Forming	Santa Barbara
VMTB-341	Forming	Santa Barbara
1st Marine Aircraft Wing		**Torokina**
Marine Air Group 12		Zamboanga, Philippines
VMF-115	22 FG-1/1D, F4U-1D	Zamboanga
VMF-211	22 F4U-1D, FG-1D	Zamboanga

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VMF-281	24 FG-1D, F4U-1/D	Zamboanga
4th Marine Aircraft Wing		**Kwajalein**
Marine Air Group 11		Peleliu
VMF-122	25 F4U-1D, FG-1D	Peleliu
VMF-122	6 F4U-1D	Ulithi
VMF(N)-541	14 F6F-5N/3N	Peleliu
VMF(N)-541	9 F6F-5N/3N	Ulithi
Marine Air Group 21		Guam
VMF(N)-534	17 F6F-5N/3N	Guam
VMF(N)-534	4 F6F-5N	Eniwetok
Marine Air Group 94		Engebi
VMF-111	24 F4U-1D, 2 SNJ-6	Engebi
VMF-155	9 F4U-1D, 1 SNJ-6	Kwajalein
VMF-155	6 F4U-1D	Majuro
VMF-155	4 F4U-1D	Roi-Namur
Ninth Marine Aircraft Wing		**Cherry Point**
Marine Fighter Group 52		Congaree
VMF-521	12 F4U-1, FG-1	Congaree
VMF-522	15 F3A-1, F4U-1, FG-1D	Congaree
VMF-523	24 F4U-1, FG-1, F3A-1	Congaree
VMF-524	28 FG-1, F3A-1, F4U-1	Congaree
Marine Night Fighter Group 53		Eagle Mountain Lake
VMF(N)-531	12 SB2C-4E, 16 F7F-1/2/3	Eagle Mountain
VMF(N)-532	11 F7F-1/2/3/N,11 F6F-3/N	Eagle Mountain
VMF(N)-544	12 F6F-5N	Eagle Mountain
Marine Air Group 91		Cherry Point
VMF-911	20 F4U-1, FG-1, F3A-1, 1 F7F	Cherry Point
VMF-912	20 F4U-1, FG-1/D, 1 F7F-3	Cherry Point
VMF-913	20 F4U-1, FG-1/D, F3A-1, 1 F7F	Cherry Point
VMF-914	20 F4U-1, FG-1, F3A-1, 1 F7F	Cherry Point

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APPENDIX 21

Deployed US Marine Corps Fighter Squadrons of World War II

VMF/VMO/VMBF

111 "Devil Dogs"
112 "Wolfpack"
113 "Whistling Devils"
114 "Death Dealers"
115 "Joe's Jokers"
121
122 "Candystripers"/"Werewolves"
123 "Eightballs"
124 "Death's Head"/"Wild Aces"
155
211 "Wake Island Avengers"
212 "Hell Hounds"
213 "Hell Hawks"
214 "Swashbucklers"/"Black Sheep"
215 "Fighting Corsairs"
216 "Bulldogs"
217 "Max's Wild Hares"
218 "Hellions"
221 "Fighting Falcons"
222 "Flying Deuces"
223 "Rainbow"/"Bulldogs"
224 "Fighting Wildcats"
225
231 "Ace of Spades"
251 "Lucifer's Messengers"
311 "Hell's Belles"
312 "Day's Knights"/"Checkerboards"
313 "Lilly Packin' Hellbirds"?
314 "Bob's Cats"
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323 "Death Rattlers"
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331 "Doodlebugs"
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422 "Flying Buccaneers"
441 "Black Jacks"
451 "Blue Devils"

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452 "Sky Raiders"
511
512
513
531 "Gray Ghosts"
532
533 "Black Mac's Killers"
534
541 "Bat Eyes"
542
543 "Night Hawks"

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APPENDIX 22

Non-deployed US Marine Corps Fighter Squadrons of World War II

VMBF-141	Redesignated October 14, 1944	Redesignated VMTB-141 December 30, 1944
VMF-461	Established March 15, 1944	Redesignated HRMM-461 January 12, 1957
VMF-462	Established April 15, 1944	Redesignated HRMM-462 November 3, 1957
VMF-471	Established May 15, 1944	Deactivated September 10, 1945
VMF-472 (I)	Established June 1, 1944	Deactivated October 10, 1944
VMF-472 (II)	Established March 1, 1945	Deactivated December 24, 1945
VMF-481 (I)	Established April 5, 1944	Deactivated October 10, 1944
VMF-481 (II)	Established August 1, 1945	Deactivated September 10, 1945
VMF-482	Established April 7, 1944	Deactivated October 10, 1944
VMF-514*	Established February 20, 1944	Deactivated December 9, 1945
VMF-521	Established April 1, 1944	Deactivated September 10, 1945
VMF-522	Established April 1, 1944	Deactivated September 10, 1945
VMF-523	Established May 5, 1944	Deactivated October 15, 1945
VMF-524	Established May 10,1944	Deactivated October 15, 1945
VMF(N)-544	Established May 1, 1944	Deactivated April 20, 1946
VMF-911	Established June 25, 1944	Deactivated March 15, 1946
VMF-912	Established July 10, 1944	Deactivated March 15, 1946
VMF-913	Established July 15, 1944	Deactivated March 15, 1946
VMF-914	Established August 14, 1944	Deactivated January 31, 1946
VMF-921	Established August 21, 1944	Deactivated October 10, 1944
VMF-922	Established August 21, 1944	Deactivated October 10, 1944
VMF-923	Established September 15, 1944	Deactivated October 10, 1944
VMF-924	Established April 10, 1944	Deactivated October 10, 1944
VMBF-931	Redesignated October 1, 1944	Redesignated VMSB-931 December 30, 1944
VMBF-932	Redesignated October 16, 1944	Redesignated VMSB-932 December 30, 1944

* VMF-514 was en route to Hawaii on VJ Day.

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APPENDIX 23

Current US Marine Fighter and Attack Squadrons with World War II Heritage

(as of November 2013)

VMFA (F/A-18A/C Hornet)

112 "Cowboys" – MAG 41, MCAS Fort Worth, Texas
115 "Silver Eagles" – MAG 31, MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina
122 "Werewolves" – MAG 31, MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina
232* "Red Devils" – MAG 11, MCAS Yuma, Arizona
251 "Thunderbolts" – MAG 31, MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina
312 "Checkerboard" – MAG 31, MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina
314 "Black Knights" – MAG 11, MCAS Miramar, California
323 "Death Rattlers" MAG 11, MCAS Miramar, California

* VMSB/VMTB squadron in World War II

VMFA(AW) (F/A-18D Hornet)

224 "Bengals" – MAG 31, MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina
225 "Vikings" – MAG 11, MCAS Miramar, California
242* "Bats" –MAG 12, MCAS Kadena, Japan
533 "Hawks" – MAG 31, MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina

* VMTB squadron in World War II

VMFA (F-35B Lightning II)

121 "Green Knights" – MAG 13 MCAS Yuma, Arizona

VMA (AV-8B Harrier II)

211 "Wake Avengers" – MAG 13, MCAS Yuma, Arizona
214 "Black Sheep" – MAG 13, MCAS Yuma, Arizona
223 "Bulldogs" – MAG 14, MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina
231* "Ace of Spades" – MAG 14, MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina
311 "Tomcats" – MAG 13 MCAS Yuma, Arizona
542 "Tigers" – MAG 14, MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina

* VMSB squadron in World War II

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APPENDIX 24

Selected World War II Aviation Airfields

Awase	airfield in southeastern Okinawa
Ballale	island off the south tip of Bougainville
Bougainville	largest of the Solomon Islands
Camp Kearney	see Miramar
Cherry Point	US Marine Corps air station in North Carolina
Chimu	airfield in central Okinawa
Congaree	airfield in South Carolina
Eagle Mountain Lake	US Marine Corps air station north of Ft Worth, Texas
Efate	island in New Hebrides southeast of the Solomons
El Toro	US Marine Corps air station near Los Angeles
Emirau	island in the Bismarck Archipelago
Engebi	island in Kwajalein Atoll, Marshall Islands
Eniwetok	large atoll in the Marshall Islands
Espiritu Santo	island in New Hebrides southeast of the Solomons
Ewa	US Marine Corps air station on Oahu
Funafuti	atoll in the Ellice Islands
Green Island	east of Rabaul, north of Bougainville
Guadalcanal	largest of the Solomon Islands
Ie Shima	island off the northwest coast of Okinawa
Kadena	airfield in southwestern Okinawa
Kahili	airfield on Bougainville's south coast
Kwajalein	large atoll in the Marshall Islands, 2,300 miles southwest of Oahu
Leyte	major island in the Philippines
Majuro	large atoll in the Marshall Islands
Makin	chain of islands in the Gilberts
Miramar	US Marine Corps air station north of San Diego
Mojave	US Marine Corps air station in south central California
Munda	island in the central Solomons
Nanomea	atoll in the northwestern Ellice Islands
Nukufetau	small atoll northwest of Funafuti, Ellice Islands
Palmyra	atoll 1,100 miles southwest of Oahu
Peleliu	major island in the Palaus
Ponape	island in the Carolines
Roi-Namur	island in Kwajalein Atoll, Marshall Islands
Russells	islands west of Guadalcanal
Santa Barbara	US Marine Corps air station north of Los Angeles
Tontouta	airfield in New Caledonia
Torokina	airfield on Bougainville
Turtle Bay	airfield on Espiritu Santo, New Hebrides
Tutuila	island in Samoa
Ulithi	atoll in the Caroline Islands

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Vella Lavella	island in the central Solomons
Wallis Island	major island of the Wallis Archipelago, 860 miles from New Zealand
Yontan	airfield in southwestern Okinawa
Zamboanga	airfield on Mindanao, southern Philippines

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